

BROAD CHURCH.

A Nobel.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "PHILIP PATERNOSTER: A TRACTARIAN LOVE STORY,"
"UNORTHODOX LONDON," ETC.

"To yield reasonable satisfaction to the religious sentiment in the emotional nature of man is the problem of problems at the present hour."

PROFESSOR TYTBALL'S *Belfast Address*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I

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BROAD CHURCH.

BOOK I. CUPID.

CHAPTER I.

HIGH JINKS AT POMONA HOUSE.

TWELFTH NIGHT of a certain year of grace which shall be nameless, was to be marked with a white stone in the annals of Sturminster village and its vicinity, for the Villarses were giving a ball. It was none of your juvenile affairs, where boys and girls meet for the purpose of playing at snapdragon and otherwise simply enjoying themselves; but a real grown-up matter, and meant business. The match-making mammas and marriageable maidens within a radius of ten miles recognised their

opportunity, and palpitated with excitement. The invited had centred their thoughts for the preceding three weeks on millinery and personal decorations in general. The uninvited pined in secret dismay, and vainly strove to conceal their disappointment by speaking disparagingly of the Villarses as "low."

The Villarses were not "county" people, nor was Pomona House a locale where you would be likely to meet the Upper Ten. But Pomona House meant money, and it was well known that George Villars, brewer though he was, could buy up half the landed gentry of East Clodshire. Rumour knew exactly how many thousands George Villars could give to each of his three daughters—how much he had given the eldest,—and still leave a handsome surplus to carry him to his grave, without stinting the luxuries of Pomona House; and Rumour was not so far wrong as she sometimes is in this particular instance; for, thanks to his luck in discovering the stomachic properties of a certain well,

buying the property cheap, and spending his money judiciously in advertising, George Villars had made a very lucky hit indeed.

The expected day arrived, as Virgil has it, and East Clodshire gravitated to Sturminster as a focus. A few magnates, trembling on the very verge of county respectability, threw aside their scruples, and went; though, when they accepted the invitation, it was with the avowed intention of having a sudden cold or bilious attack on the evening in question. Their curiosity, however, or their cupidity, proved too much for them at last, and they felt that, come what would of it, they must brave the wrath of respectable Clodshire, and go. Nay, certain dowagers of the first water urged these hangers-on to be present and see what "these" sort of people did on such occasions. They felt that this lower stratum of county society might go without irretrievably compromising their order. So they went accordingly.

"Promise to come over the very next day, and give me a full account, dear Mrs. Tuft-

Hunter," said the Duchess of Brabazon. "It will be so droll to see these sort of people"—that was a bit of bad grammar her Grace always affected, though she knew better—"to see these sort of people off their guard. They always shut up when they meet us. Don't forget to quiz them mercilessly. Good-by."

"Rely upon my not sparing them, my dear Duchess. Au revoir."

Mrs. Tuft-Hunter had to draw wildly upon her imagination to quiz the Villars's "affair;" for, in very truth, it was perfect, and (as she was fain to confess inwardly) far better than the ducal spreads which came off from time to time at Brabazon Lodge; the characteristics of such "affairs" being wont to be frigidity and scantiness of provisions. They were, of course, intensely respectable, but proportionately stingy and uncomfortable.

There was certainly no frigidity at Pomona House. The band was Coote and Tinney's best. The viands were of the costliest, and

the sparkling Moselle flowed as freely as the waters of the Stomachic Spring itself. There was a separate room devoted to oysters and stout for the young bachelors. There was—*credite posteri*—a smoking room on the second floor. You might call for anything, from ortolans to a cutty-pipe, without your call being dishonoured. The Villarses knew how to do the thing; and they did it regardless of expense.

Mrs. Villars bustled about her well-filled rooms with a British-matron-like consciousness of success. She was a round, fussy little woman, with a certain air of dignity which she had neither the size nor the education to carry off to advantage. It seemed as though, by some queer, unorthodox, Darwinian kind of process, Fate had intended her for a marchioness, but stopped short through some hitch in the machinery at a tradesman's daughter. Such, at all events, Mrs. Villars had been when George bore her off triumphantly from a back parlour and batch of protesting relatives somewhere near

Portman Market; the aforesaid relations being dissatisfied with George's "prospects."

George himself, whose prospects had long ago brightened so rapidly as to enable him once and for all to give the go-by to Portman Market, and establish himself in the neighbouring and particularly "downy" locality of Portland Place—George was a big, brassy-voiced man, whose presence invariably suggested to strangers the idea of an auctioneer. He was large and blatant, with nothing in his cranium worthy to be dignified with the title of intellect—that would probably have stood in the way of his advancement—but with just that amount of strong common sense, inflexible will, and not too *prononcé* impudence, which enabled him to make his way amongst his malt and hops and stomachic water, to the splendid fortune he had realized in a few years.

The Villarses had no son; and the daughters—as seems the custom not unfrequently with Dame Nature—partook more of the physique of the father than the mother.

Let us describe them seriatim as they are playing their parts in the ball-room, premising that Mrs. Villars is, as was said, shooting about from room to room, hobnobbing with such guests as condescended to recognise her existence, and smiling blandly on those who did not; whilst George has retired to the room upstairs for a quiet smoke with some of the young bumpkins for whom Terpischore has no charm.

Clara, the eldest daughter, aged twenty-five, a blooming widow, had made what her parents considered something of a *mésalliance*, having married a young country apothecary, who spent her money in establishing a practice which brought no returns, and then retired gracefully from a life whose difficulties were too many and great for his feeble faculties to grapple with. There had been a little coolness between Pomona House and the country surgery, but not enough to make the young widow hesitate as to her course. Clara, thrown on the world, though fortunately without family, was not the woman

to think of going out as governess, or living upon the scanty fragments of her fortune. She took an entirely practical view of matters; sold off the furniture and physic to another weak-minded aspirant for the honour of dosing the little overgrown village, and then returned straightway to Pomona House as a thing of course. No objection was raised; and she has now settled down for more than a year, in all the bloom of youth, combined with the more than matronly dignity of widowhood. Arrayed in killing black, she is dancing with Mr. Atkins, a big-boned horsey country squire from Shire Hall, some nine miles off; and, as Mrs. Villars flits in and out of the ball-room, she embraces all Clara's plans in her comprehensive glance; and inwardly chuckles, as she says to herself, "The dear child will do better this time."

Then there is Emily, the second daughter, two years younger, who is flirting over a *sorbet* with Miles Denton, the rector's son, a rapid university "man," not equal to the

occasion. Emily, though still of the large-boned type, is somewhat thin, and looks underfed. She terms herself *spirituelle*, and goes in for literature, romance, and that kind of thing. Miles understands nothing of all this. Indeed, he does not understand much about anything; understanding is not in his line. He is simply an uninteresting and utterly brainless Dundreary. Even his poor fluffy moustache, which a kitten could lick into nothingness, is too much for him, and demands for its cultivation more energy than he possesses. Consequently, when Emily Villars asks him if he doesn't adore Browning's "Balaustion," he feebly murmurs "Ya-as," and is only aroused to a troubled consciousness of impending examination, when she further inquires whether he does not consider the story of Alcestis a "gem," and wants to know which is right, "Alkestis" or "Alcestis." The poor boy burks the question, and meditates within his small self on the marvel of anybody calling anything associated with Greek Plays a "gem."

Miles is glad when the ice is done, whereupon he hands Emily over to a dancing man, and retires to the congenial shades of the smoking room.

Ethel, the youngest of the trio, and just eighteen, is æsthetic and ecclesiastical in her tastes. At the present moment she is sitting alone, looking anxiously at the *portière* for the arrival of the curate, who has had late "Evensong" on the "Festival of the Epiphany." Ethel is not pretty, her cheekbones are too high, and there is altogether too much of her, but she looks, and is treated by her sisters like a big baby; so she has gradually got reconciled to the *rôle*, and simpers like a mature infant. She bristles all over with little crosses, and is enveloped in rosaries and other machinery of devotion; and stews herself in Black Holes of schools every day: but she is a good girl, and looks perfectly happy now that the Reverend Cyprian Gules has put in an appearance. The "Evensong went beautifully," he tells her, though he missed

her voice in the Gregorians; but her "decorations" were duly appreciated by the congregation. To his demand, "Are you going to dance?" she answered, with childlike simplicity, "Not unless you do." To which Cyprian rejoined, "Ethel, my dear, how can you suggest such a thing?" And he made so free with her hand, as well as her Christian name, that, had not celibacy been reckoned by him among the cardinal virtues, there is no knowing what might have happened. Within the realms of possibility, however, it would scarcely have occurred to any one to imagine Cyprian's long tails and thin legs spinning round in a valse. He was wise to forego it, and fall back upon his spiritual dignity.

And so the high jinks sped merrily. By ten o'clock most of the arrivals were over, for Sturminster had not yet aspired to the "correct hours" of town, though promising nevertheless on the present occasion to turn night into day. The files of Gorgons ranged round the room, as if to warn young ladies

of the horrors of spinsterhood, already quivered with the intelligence that two definite proposals had been made before supper; so what might not be expected afterwards?

"I know I saw young Cartwright of Bannock's Farm, standing with his arm round Mary Jones full five minutes after the gallop was over; and I heard him ask her what time to-morrow it would be convenient for him to call and see her papa," said Miss Souchong, an amiable old maid, who could see as far through a milestone as most people in Sturminster.

"It's disgusting," added her neighbour, Miss Tart, in a vinegar voice, "positively disgusting. People used to make love in private in my days." People did say that Miss Tart's peculiar views on the subject of matrimony were of the class typified by the fox in the vineyard; and that nobody made love either publicly or privately in her day as far as she was concerned. At all events, there she was, stranded on her out-seat, an

unmitigated wallflower, left blooming alone, and railing at matrimony. Her friend Miss Souchong, on the other hand, unmarried as she was, and with a sad story of her own to tell if she chose, was never so happy as when she saw young lovers making things straight, and Miss Souchong, in so doing, represented a very large section of that often undeservedly abused sisterhood.

"It's settled between Willie and Amy," whispered a buxom matron who had been trying a long time to bring a swain to book. "He proposed in the last quadrille," she added as she sidled happily away among the dancers.

"Capital! I congratulate you," said Miss Souchong. She was the confidante of nine-tenths of the lovers in Sturminster.

"Horrible!" snarled Miss Tart.

The first batch of heavy Benedicts and matrons had gone in to supper; and the wearied musicians were snatching a brief interlude of repose and sherry, which combined causes produced a lull in the general

proceedings, and left room for a conversation that bears upon our present history.

Clara Thornton, George Villars's eldest daughter, did not consider herself a matron at all ; or, had it been convenient for her to assume that dignity, she certainly would not have ranked herself with the heavier sort, eligible for the first batch of supper people. She wore the wickedest little soupçon of mourning, and had evidently enmeshed the stout heart of Squire Atkins. She led the bucolic swain to a flirting-chair, where she had him all to herself ; and they looked like a modernized tableau of Hercules and Omphale.

"So, Mr. Atkins, you say you are tired of a single life," said Clara, plunging at once into the midst of the matter, which, be it observed, had been gradually worked up to in a series of successive dances, but was to come to its climax here, and now, it seemed.

"Heartily and sincerely wearied," said the Squire, looking as stupid as one of his own cows, but immensely interested in the

less ; in so far that is, as his bovine nature was capable of happiness.

"And you think bliss comes as a matter of course with Hymen."

"Not, perhaps, under all circumstances, but when the parties——" Here he broke down, and could only look his meaning. Clara helped him out of his difficulty in her own peculiar way.

"Rather a commercial way of putting it; but still, to the point. Where the 'parties' to the concern' are possessed of the requisite capital——"

"I didn't mean that for a moment, dear Mrs. Thornton," said he, with impetuosity and genuine warmth, thinking the young widow referred to her own broken fortunes, the history of which, of course, every gossip in Sturminster knew.

Atkins was a thoroughly good manly fellow, though literal and unromantic as a dray horse.

"The requisite amount of 'headpiece, I mean," said Clara, "and what are called

qualities of heart. Then you think the joint-stock firm may pay?"

He did not quite like the way it was put, but was fain to simper "Yes" in an elephantine sort of manner. Clara continued:—

"But then everybody takes the premises for granted. That's the enormous fallacy of matrimony. You and I, for instance, are not boy and girl, but supposing we could possibly do such a silly thing as to fall in love with one another—I say imagine the possibility for one moment. Will you try?"

Here occurred a splendid opportunity, which, to his disgrace, Mr. Atkins let go by irretrievably.

"The first thing we should do would be to settle, either that we were exactly alike, and thus suited to one another, or else such thorough contrasts that each would just fill up the gaps in the other's nature—which I fancy is Schlegel's theory, is it not?"

"I don't know," said he, hastily, for

he was angry with himself. "Hang Schlegel—I never heard of him. Come to the point," was something like what he meant.

"Whereas, no doubt, any sensible third party—if ever there were third parties present at love-makings—could tell us we were utterly unsuited to each other, and should hate one another before the honeymoon was over."

"Now you really don't think so, do you, dear Mrs. Thornton?" The squire was getting on. "Dear Mrs. Thornton, will you let me——"

"Call in the 'third party?' Well, not just yet. Who's that?" Uttering an inward anathema on all third parties, of whatever sex or condition—he looked up at Clara's exclamation, and would have looked back in an instant at the beautiful face so very close to his, had not Clara forced him to attend, and answer her question.

"That young man, who has just come

into the room, and seems hesitating where to deposit himself—who is he?"

"Never saw him before in my life," said Atkins, devoutly hoping he might never see him again to the day of his death.

"But I must and will know before I enter anew upon our interesting and edifying subject. Go and find out."

He still hesitated, fearing lest if he vacated his seat, the stranger, or somebody else, might take it. "That fellow seems impudent enough to do it," said he, *sotto voce*. "I do hate these London swells, who look as though ball-rooms belonged to them when they make their entrance."

As he rose to go, Miss Souchong crossed over, and answered Clara's look of inquiry by saying—

"That's the new curate of Combe Dean. Isn't he handsome?"

"*That* a curate!" said Clara. And she said no more just then.

She then turned heavily down to pre-
paring the seat by

Clara's side ; and the poor old lady, with a murmured " Well, Mr. Atkins, that's polite ! " passed back to the dreary file of old faded wallflowers, who were not only hungry, but irate at being kept waiting so long. That was the mental and bodily condition of the old ones, who wondered by what perverse rule of destiny matrons took precedence of maids. The young ones were grouped picturesquely on stairs and in conservatories, devoting themselves to the business of the evening, flirting for dear life with their faithful cavaliers, and oblivious quite of such material concerns as supper.

The new-comer lingered awhile after crossing the threshold, and stood, as if seeking the hostess. It was an awkward position for an evident stranger ; but he remained quietly surveying the long files of tabbies and scattered groups of lovers, without the assumption of nonchalance, but certainly without any symptom of awkwardness, though he was the centre of a hundred pairs of inquiring eyes.

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at his own apparent dilemma, for there did not seem to be an available seat which would remove him from the centre of that gazing circle; but he found and passed to one just as Clara dashed every earthly hope in Squire Atkins, by saying—

“How excessively awkward! I really think I ought to personate mamma, and make him feel at home. Will you oblige me by going to the supper-room, and seeing if the first batch is likely to come out to-night?”

He had no alternative but to comply; and it was at this moment that the new arrival went to his seat among the wall-flowers, passing close by the one Squire Atkins had left vacant.

That choice of a seat on his part decided the destinies of three human beings in the room!

The first batch of supper-eaters returned, and the old maids managed to sneak in among batch number two. Dancing recommenced with a heavy quadrille for the

old people. Clara was forced to join it with the adipose rector of Sturminster, Mr. Denton, who danced steps, and wore white cotton gloves too long in the fingers, like a waiter or an undertaker's man; but she fixed a fascinated gaze on the new-comer, and kept on asking herself the remarkable question, "Is it possible? *That a curate!*" As though a curate were some nondescript *thing*. Sydney Smith said there were three sexes—men, women, and clergymen.

Claude Vallance—that was his name—the Rev. Claude Vallance, M.A., and fellow of a third-rate hall at one of the great universities, in full—was certainly not of the curate type as to his outward man. In the first place, he looked a little too old for the "inferior" ministry. Critics of the *Saturday Review* school would have added that he also looked too intelligent. Suffice it to say that, neither physically, intellectually, nor in his garb, did he in the least resemble the clerical order. Short hair, curling crisply over a high white forehead, and

closely shaven face, suggested the bust of a Byron or Antinous; whilst his broad shoulders might have belonged to the *torso* of Hercules. He was arrayed in the plainest of evening dress suits, with a waistcoat wide open over his broad chest, and a very large turned-down shirt-collar, without any necktie at all, the shirt being loosely fastened over his massive throat with a single gold button. The Rev. Cyprian Gules, who wore Roman bands, and the correct clerical dress-coat, which looked like that of a livery-servant in a serious family, claimed acquaintance with Vallance in honour of their mutual "cloth," and, after shaking him timidly by the hand, remarked to Ethel that he was "rather like an actor." He did resemble an actor or a literary man more than a country curate.

"Kindly introduce me to the hostess, will you?" he said to Gules, with the air of a bishop, or archdeacon at the very least: and Gules, who had been in with the first batch of supper-people to intone a blessing

on the "creatures" (meaning the food), was fain to do it; but he rejoined Ethel immediately, and Claude Vallance, who had taken the opportunity of his hostess's pause in the quadrille, left her to flutter through it, as old matrons do, and went back to his seat of destiny again.

Sitting there, amid the tabbies, and near the only available space where Claude could deposit his far from homœopathic self, was a little girl, Ada Parkinson, the best description of whom is the exceedingly trite and commonplace one that she would "pass in a crowd." That was exactly what she had done all her life, and was at that moment doing. In that crowd she was alone. She really seemed the only eligible young lady who was not flirting; and there was no reason at all, in the nature of things, why she should not have been doing so. Possibly she might not have objected. If that *nez retroussé* did not belie her, she certainly would not. Two signs on the female face speak volumes to a physiognomist—a pug-

nose and the suspicion of a moustache. Ada possessed the former emphatically. She might, could, would, or—possibly—should have been flirting. But at that crucial moment she wasn't. That was all.

Ada was one of those miniature girls in whom Nature seems to delight to show her beauty of mere proportion. Pretty, perhaps, she might not be called, if you went through that utterly unnecessary process called "taking her to pieces." Practically one does not want to take women to pieces; and, compact as she was, she was simply perfect as a specimen of a nice little English girl. Her nose we have confessed as unquestionably pug, but certainly no other nose would have harmonized with the rest of her features; and therefore, we may venture to infer, destiny made it a pug. Her eyes were neither of celestial blue nor black as the sloe, but of a tender and crystalline grey; her hair abundant and brown, not soft or glossy, but, on the contrary, of a captivating "frizz," which enabled her to

dispense altogether with those mysterious adjuncts of the female head which leave us in pleasing doubt as to how much of the *chevelure* is human and how much horse-hair. Her hands were tiny—she was tiny altogether—but plump and useful-looking. She had been a *bijou* baby, and she grew up to her present age of twenty, a miniature, pleasing, unobtrusive little girl, willing and likely to pass in the crowd, unless some discriminating individual in that crowd should discover how surpassingly nice and good she was, and devote himself to bringing her out of her obscurity. It is indeed a great comfort when Nature, in making up that wonderful combination called a woman, is content not to overact her part, and give us too much of a good thing. Great sprawling beauties, like Hastings oysters, may suit the general run of humankind; but only a titbit, like a Whitstable native, pleases your connoisseur.

For a long time Claude did not notice his little neighbour. Had she been a big

neighbour, he probably would never have noticed her at all ; for, if the truth is to be told, Claude *was* a connoisseur ; and it was not presently that even the wee thing took his notice.

After surveying for some time in silence the now talkative groups fresh from the supper-room, he found himself inadvertently saying aloud—

“ Forsooth, a goodly company ! ”

Ada heard him, and looked up with one of her own simple smiles—a smile which he afterwards told her seemed to say to him, being interpreted, “ Come and talk.” And they did talk at once.

“ Either Sturminster must be one of the most sociable of places, or must surely have sent its whole population *en masse* to Mrs. Villars’s to-night. I had no notion I had so many neighbours.”

So he was a resident. Ada was cogitating in her mind, as were a good many others by this time, who he could possibly be.

“ We are, I believe, all Sturminster

people; that is, from Sturminster and the neighbourhood, except——”

“No, not excepting me,” said Claude. “I am a resident too. I am the new curate of Combe Dean, a few miles off. Let us introduce ourselves to each other—shall we?”

“With all my heart; especially as we are such near neighbours. I am Ada Parkinson, daughter of Captain Parkinson, of Dale House, in your parish. We have been away from home for a few weeks, or papa, I am sure——”

“Would have forestalled this very original and pleasant introduction of ours. Will you excuse me for saying I am glad he did not? I like anything a little out of the ordinary run of etiquette and formality—don’t you? I am a bit of a Lavater, and I fancy, from my brief observations, you do. Am I right?”

Claude was right; and she told him so frankly and cheerily; and wondered why Clara Thornton, who had finished off the podgy rector in the last figure of the quadrille, scowled at her so as she passed.

"Papa will, of course, take the first opportunity of calling on you. We have not so many neighbours at Combe Dean that we can afford to lose a new one."

"There must be a great deal of still life there, I should think," answered Claude; "at least, for the unemployed. I have my work, of course—two or three works, in fact—but I wonder how unemployed people, young ladies in general, you in particular, get through the day at Combe Dean."

"Do you, indeed? Then let me tell you, you know very little of a young lady's life, or how often she wishes the day had thirty-six hours, instead of twenty-four, in it."

And so she detailed to him all the simple pursuits of her life at Combe Dean.

It was a new sensation for Claude; and he behaved rather brusquely when Mrs. Clara Thornton said to him—

"I hope you will not forget the supper-room;" looking a look which added, "you may take me in if you like."

"Thanks; I will find room in a solitary

corner by-and-by ;" adding to Ada, as Clara swept away in dudgeon—

" May I take you in ?"

" Certainly. Shall we see if we can find papa *en route* ? I fancy he must be in the smoking room, though, he is so fond of his cigar. Do you smoke, Mr. Vallance ?"

" Like a volcano."

" That will be a bond of union. You and papa will be fast friends, I prophesy."

'They found Captain Parkinson in the supper-room with a batch of "boys," redolent of the fragrant weed. A fresh-faced country gentleman, with heavy grey moustache, but bright eyes and juvenile manners ; well dressed, though in garments that had evidently seen service ; and which, combined with Ada's modest *tenue*, and absence of jewellery, inspired Vallance to say, inwardly—

" Hum ! A poor gentleman, but a gentleman every inch. I'm glad she isn't an heiress."

And so eventually the jinks broke up,

deep in the small hours of the morning, with coffee and eggs—a veritable heavy breakfast, in fact. That was always the Sturminster fashion, common to a great portion of East Clodshire. No danger of dying from hunger in that hospitable place. It was a wonder the inhabitants were not all Bantings.

Every heart was lighter for the jinks, excepting some of the poor wallflowers, whose shrivelled affairs were in a pretty uniform condition of neutrality, and some dated therefrom their lifelong happiness; more, in fact, than we have been able to chronicle, for we have only named the decisive “engagements.” There was some severe skirmishing besides.

Claude Vallance drove home with the Parkinsons, having come on foot, and, as is the custom with country curates, taken off his goloshes and overcoat, and turned down his trousers humbly in the hall of Pomona House. As he tumbled in that night he soliloquized—

“Claude, my fine fellow, this won’t do ; this feels remarkably like falling in love. I shall take a ten-mile spurt to-morrow, and work it off.” Just as though his double had been giving him advice, and he stated his readiness to act upon it.

We shall see how he carried out his philosophic resolve.





CHAPTER II.

AD MORTEM FIDELIS.

CLAUDE VALLANCE was one of those muscular Christians who are ready to exclaim, with the Emperor Titus, "Perdidi diem—I have lost a day!" unless they inaugurate it with a mercilessly cold bath, and take, during its progress, what they call a "constitutional." He accounted for his vigorous health by a strict observance of these two rules in a life otherwise irregular—viz., to let nothing interfere either with his morning bath, or his walk abroad. He even went so far as to philosophize on the subject, and averred that there was no mental anxiety which he could not conquer by this physical regimen; either washing it out in ice-cold water, and rubbing it off with a rough towel, or else

walking it down, as he proposed to do on this occasion, with a ten-mile spurt. Let us follow his movements.

He took his cold tub that January morning, breaking a thin layer of ice on the surface to do it, puffing like a grampus during the process, and coming out glowing amongst his books to breakfast and a pipe.

"There," he soliloquized, as he stretched himself on his easy-chair. "I always feel like old Ulysses, not only fresher and cleaner, but bigger, after such a towelling as that. Letters!" he continued, surveying a heap of some dozen, great and small. "Come here, you *incubi!*"

Let us for a moment analyse the contents of a portion at least of Claude Vallance's correspondence, and note his comments thereupon. It will enlighten us a little as to his pursuits.

"Messrs. Drybones' compliments to Mr. Vallance, and they beg to remind him that the translation of Apollonius Rhodius should have been ready by Christmas. They hope

to receive it in a few days." "Hope on, old boys," said Claude; "there's nothing like it. I only wish you may get it."

"The Editor of 'Flimsy' likes the Spirit-rapping story, but rather fears the subject. Will keep it until next Christmas on the chance of using it, if Mr. Vallance will allow." "Cool!" was the monosyllabic comment.

"Messrs. Maximilian enclose cheque for ten guineas"—(Swindle! it should have been twelve")—"for last contribution. Glad to receive fresh copy." "Not at that rate, my fine fellows. Mem. To send receipt, but no more copy."

"The Editor of the 'Diurnal Velocipede' much regrets that pressure of news and advertisements prevents him from using Mr. Vallance's special article." "Why can't these editors say at once they don't like a thing, or don't want it? As though the 'Velocipede' had commenced news and advertisements for the first time this week! The subject will keep. It shall go to the

opposition shop." And he put it an envelope ready addressed to the "Editor of the Quotidian Indicator."

"The Editor of the 'Platform' wants half a dozen more sermons;" "The Editor of the 'Rosa Matilda' would be obliged by some more sonnets;" and "The Manager of the Clapham Theatre hopes Mr. Vallance will make it convenient to run up to town, and read his comedietta to the company," &c. &c.

"A pretty good instalment by one post!" ejaculated Claude. "That ought to be enough to knock the nonsense out of one—if the nonsense were ever going to get in, that is, which it isn't. Let's see how much I've made out of the 'Gadfly' this week." And whilst he demolished his breakfast he read his own contributions to the penny comic, measuring them with a foot-rule, and calculating his plunder by the number of inches. "Not a bad haul. Now for the 'Church Telegraph.' Eh! printed last article on 'The Versatility of the English

Clergy,' I see." And as he poured forth huge volumes of smoke from his pipe he read his own article, and smiled—not in vanity, as may be inferred from his criticism—

"Egregious twaddle! what *won't* these fellows print? It's enough to make one prostitute one's pen for pelf. I thought the temptation would be less strong down here. What noodles they are to preserve the anonymous in papers and magazines. I would have died before I would have put my name to one of these articles."

It was noon by the time Claude had finished his breakfast and letters, for the jinks had been fatal to early rising. It mattered not how or when he got it, but a certain adequate amount of sleep was necessary to Claude, as to all men whose work is principally mental. He could throw himself in his easy-chair at any given moment, and, however taxed with work, sleep the sleep of an infant, and rise like a giant refreshed. He felt as fresh as a daisy, therefore, when,

having assumed his rough frieze shooting-coat and wide-awake hat, he stood, oaken staff in hand, ready to set forth on his "disillusionizing" walk. As he drew near to open the door of his sitting-room, a timid knock sounded, and the little servant-girl entered.

"Please, sir, missis say, what will you have for dinner?"

"The most perplexing question I have to settle, Kate. I must make out a list for each day in the week. Can't you suggest anything?"

"Well, sir, would you like a little loin of mutton, sir?"

"Excellently well. A little loin of mutton be it;" adding, as she left the room, "extraordinary instance of the conservative character of the rustic mind! We have had that dialogue almost every other day for the last two months, like a litany and responses; and yet she brings out that persistent little loin of mutton, like a new and brilliant notion, on every occasion.

How blessed the lot of those whose fate it is that they shall not be troubled with new ideas!"

It had been Claude's paramount hope that, in coming down to the quiet country, he should enjoy a brief mental Sabbath, a rest from the flux of ideas which had whelmed his mind for so many years. Has he only changed the kind, not the degree? Is he yet to prove the master passion?

It was a crisp frosty day when he set out, with the ground like iron underfoot, and rime upon the branches, which the midday sun had not melted. Hercules though he was—perhaps Hercules *because* he was—Claude did not appreciate the fine "bracing" day, which less vigorous constitutions land to the skies. He did not need bracing, and could bear the relaxation of a mild sou'wester, which he infinitely preferred. An east wind he held his personal enemy; it dried up every idea and energy in him.

He called at several cottages, distributing

the alms of the previous Sunday to the women in the shape of shillings or pence of snuff, prayed with one or two sick folk, and read of undying hopes beyond to some few who were obviously going up their loins for the last solemn journey of all. This done, he set out on his journey, and soon left the little village town in the valley behind him, as he scaled the first hill-top. He took a long stretch run just to get his blood up, and then struck off vigorously to the right by a lane leading nowhither, scaled some hedges and leap-fences in supreme scorn of his neighbour's landmarks, and altogether behaved rather like an escaped lunatic than a reverend minister of the Gospel. It was Claude's peculiar way of "taking the nonsense out" of himself; and if it was in the power of athletics to accomplish such an end, the exorcism ought to have been a very complete one indeed.

But it happened, by a strange fatality, that, turn whichever way he might, he

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the alms of the previous Sunday to old women in the shape of shillings or packets of snuff, prayed with one or two sick folks, and read of undying hopes beyond to some few who were obviously girding up their loins for the last solemn journey of all. This done, he set out on *his* journey, and soon left the little village down in the valley behind him, as he scaled the first hill-top. He took a long stretch out, just to get his blood up, and then struck off vigorously to the right by a lane leading nowhither, scaled some hedges and leapt fences in supreme scorn of his neighbour's landmarks, and altogether behaved rather like an escaped lunatic than a reverend minister of the Gospel. It was Claude's peculiar way of "taking the nonsense out" of himself; and if it was in the power of athletics to accomplish such an end, the exorcism ought to have been a very complete one indeed.

But it happened, by a strange fatality, that, turn whichever way he might, or

make his circle however large, he always kept in view one little trim cottage, dignified with the name of Dale House. In fact, our friend resembled in this respect an active but adipose moth fluttering around the gaslight, and deluding himself—as no doubt the insane insect does—that his gyrations are taking the nonsense out of him; whereas, every contracting radius simply takes him nearer the centre, where his wings are doomed to be singed. Claude was, as the little children say at hide-and-seek, getting very warm, and eventually emerged right upon the lawn of Dale House; where, by an equally remarkable coincidence, Ada Parkinson was pacing the garden in a picturesque costume; and by no coincidence at all, but according to his custom always of an afternoon, her father was smoking a big number four Manilla in the most serene condition of idleness. It was his normal condition, “doing the *dalee*,” as he termed it—a placid kind of vegetable existence which was decidedly to his taste.

It was scarcely the trio—or, at all events, the male elements were scarcely such as one would expect to meet in that remote district; and, sooth to say, the girl might have adorned a Belgravian interior as she certainly did that Clodshire garden. The house was one of those snug little “boxes”—as they are appropriately termed—consisting only of two storeys, with a verandah running round the whole of three sides. It was verdant with evergreens now; and the bare branches of many a creeper told how umbrageous a spot it must be in summer.

“Reverend sir, you were expected. Smoke.” Such was the greeting extended by Captain Parkinson to Claude, along with a well-filled cigar-case, after he had shaken hands with Ada. “Run, girl, and see that dinner is ready—we keep primitive hours here—for I can see by Mr. Vallance’s face that he has been walking for an appetite.”

“Nature,” said Claude, “has blessed me

so unromantically in that respect that I am almost obliged to repress my activity, and fall back on a sedentary life, lest my powers of consumption exceed a curate's income."

"Will you pardon me, my good fellow, first for calling you a fellow at all, though I believe you have an academical title to the distinction; and secondly, for saying that I cannot quite reconcile myself to the idea of your being a curate?"

"The same remark has been made more than once before," answered Claude, "and I fear I rather pride myself on an unorthodox exterior."

"From the inferior clergy, as a rule," said Captain Parkinson, "I pray to be delivered."

"Then I am only too glad to be irregular," added Claude, laughingly. "Permit me to say, though, Captain Parkinson, that you—and I would venture to add, Miss Parkinson—are as little like your bucolic surroundings in East Clodshire as I the

generality of my more orthodox confrères at a Church Missionary meeting, or a gathering of the parochial clergy."

"Yes," said the Captain, with a merry twinkle of the eye and a sly smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "I fancy we are all round people in square holes. When we get to know one another better we shall have some confessions to make. Of course we all of us have excellent reasons for exiling ourselves to East Clodshire."

"Of course," responded Claude dreamily, and in absent manner.

The dinner that ensued was what may best be described as a "cozy" one. Early as it was, the evening shadows began to fall upon the big hills outside, and candles had to be added to the cheerful light of a large wood fire. There were two on the little round table, two on the chimney-piece, and yet other two lighted at the piano. Somebody understood the effect of plenty of light in making a somewhat musty cottage

dining-room comfortable; and Claude felt no doubt that somebody was the trim little girl who had placed the bright red bows so exactly in their proper place on her own not very handsome dress, and in among the mazes of her tangled hair.

"What do you think of the custom of saying grace before meat—asking a blessing, Mr. Vallance?" said Captain Parkinson, while Ada simpered an apologetic "Papa!"

"Barbarian to the last degree, sir. Tollite. Thracum est. Omit it, by all means, notwithstanding the traditions of my 'cloth,'" was the answer.

"He will do, Ada," said the Captain; and a silvery laugh endorsed the parental approval.

"Yes; there are many occasions on each day when I feel it far more necessary to thank Heaven than when I am going to feed." And Claude looked at Ada as though this were one of the occasions in question.

“Worthy of an alderman. Not that I despise the creature comforts by any means,” said the host.

The dinner, though simple enough, was perfect in its way, and by common consent the maid-servant was voted a bore, and relegated to the kitchen as soon as she had brought in each instalment. There was no secret as to whose hands had concocted the savoury soup or toothsome entrée, and the men toasted their fair cook in cheap Rhine wine and dry sherry as the feast progressed. By way of *pièce de résistance* came a succulent joint from an animal who, the Captain boasted, was born a tender lambkin and grew to years of muttonhood and discretion on those paternal acres. Far gone as Claude was both in previous admiration, and in appreciation of the spice of Bohemianism observable in the Parkinson ménage, he did not sit and gaze in idle admiration at the little mistress of the household. He was an excellent trencherman, and paid her the best possible compli-

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ment by doing ample justice to what she had provided.

Then the red curtains were drawn, and as Claude and her father sipped their claret and munched their olives, Ada, who was sternly forbidden to retire, sat and played fragments of Chopin or Mendelssohn while she listened to their conversation, and occasionally put in an interjectional remark, but oftener simply followed in silence, or played a pianissimo accompaniment, as she heard the old man tell of his broken fortunes in the great city, and of her dead mother whose removal soon after her own birth to the little village churchyard hard by had shed first a gloom and then an aureole of sanctity around the hamlet home. They had known no friends save each other, and that was how it came that they enjoyed Claude's new-found friendship with so keen a zest.

Claude had his story to tell too; and the music, died down to a fitful chord, just whispered at intervals as he told of the

hard battles early begun and long continued, by which he had fought his way to the humble eminence he had gained. It was an ambition of his father, who was in business, that Claude should at all events take a degree, and afterwards Holy Orders or not, as he would; but the old man had the foolish penchant, commoner a generation or two ago than now, that his son should enter a profession. Claude did all he could to humour him, though funds were scarce, and his pen had to contribute largely to his maintenance at college. Once there, he fell in with the old man's views; for, amid all its artificialities, there is something about college life which cannot fail to have attractions for a man of intellectual tastes and studious habits. He was no boy when he went up; and he thrashed the first trio of drunken idiots who came, as was the custom in those days, to pull the freshman out of bed, so very satisfactorily, and kicked the next assaulting party down the steep stairs so very completely, and moreover sang such

a roaring song at their "wine" the next evening, and could drink or smoke his juvenile rivals under the table as easily as he could punch their heads round or kick them down stairs, so that he at once became a hero, and might have headed the first "set" in his not very aristocratic hall, only he had a soul very much above sets altogether; and when, by-and-by, his *nom de plume* oozed out, and article after article in the London magazines was traced to St. Boniface's, the small celebrities of the institution went in for unlimited hero-worship, and Claude could have had an university as well as a college reputation if he would.

He had read much and discursively before he went up, so that the limited curriculum necessary for academic fame did not cost him much trouble. He ambitioned a fellowship purely for its proceeds, not for the honour of the thing, and pretty well walked over the course for it. The "dons" wanted him in Common Room; and, say what folks will of the incorruptibility of college elec-

tions, such considerations do make a decided difference in the fate of candidates. He got his fellowship a year after taking his B.A., and dashed all the hopes of the dons to earth, as well as—be it confessed—denied himself the continuance of a life he thoroughly enjoyed by refusing the offer of a college chaplaincy, and going to a London curacy, where his old father lived out the rest of his days with him.

When he died, Claude spent for a long time a purely literary life. He liked his former chums less when developed into curates than in their embryo condition of undergraduateship. Eventually, however, he drifted back into clerical life again; and this was as much explanation as he thought proper to give Captain Parkinson of his reason for doing so—

“It seemed to me as though there was something to be done in the old Church yet, if men would only give her a chance.”

“And especially if there were only *men* to do it, and not the emasculated creatures one

so often sees fussing about in their long-tailed coats, with a troop of silly women after them."

"Not one word against women, whether as worshippers or workers," said Claude. "If I were organizing a Church service I would have nothing but women in the chancel."

"Save and except yourself."

"Save and except myself. I would have no squealing boys or baccy-smelling men in my choir. I have sometimes thought I would put my girls in surplices, with long hair trailing down their back. Woman is so essentially the worshipping animal."

Claude looked at Ada very much as though he were a worshipping animal himself.

"Vastly fine, my friend! Why, you would be a sort of correct Brigham Young, or Mr. Prince in his Agapemone."

"I think questions of sex should not obtrude themselves into worship. Most men are so distinctly masculine in mind as well as body."

"Not curates."

"No; not curates, as a rule, but——"

"You yourself are not ladylike," said the captain.

"I shave myself smooth as a girl, not because I am a scribbler, but purely because in my clerical position I feel more at one with the female than the male element in my congregation. I believe the angels are sexless."

"I don't," rejoined the captain, very bluntly, and with a significant glance at Claude.

Then they passed to more sublunary matters. Claude told the captain how it was greatly the fact of Ada wearing no jewellery that first attracted his attention.

"I hate jewels," he said, "and would rather have warts on my hand than a ring. Any cad can beat me at that; just as any one can grow a bigger beard, often big in proportion to his beefiness. Shave clean, or not at all—anything between is affectation—and wear no ring. A good hand does

not want them; a bad one has no right to draw attention to its hideousness."

"I'll shave my moustache off to-morrow, and preserve your friendship if I can," laughed the captain.

"Pardon me; your moustache is as truly a badge of your profession as my bald cheeks of mine."

And so, with more music and much consumption of cigars and coffee, the evening sped—the first evening of his fascination, the birth to a new life. A vulgar, self-sufficient fool would have deemed that Captain Parkinson had marked him down for his penniless girl, and would have interpreted his volunteered disavowal as a confirmation of that idea. Claude knew better; and might have been staggered by his parting words, only Claude's maxim was that difficulties were made to be overcome. They had been talking of their common poverty, and Captain Parkinson said—

"My only hope—not for myself, but for her," pointing to Ada as he spoke, "is

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that she will marry money. She must, in fact."

So Claude stepped out into the starlight, and footed it home again to his solitary lodging. All the way along the crisp roads, and afterwards when he sat wasting the midnight oil over sensation stories that would not "go," and snatches of love poetry that would come unbidden, those words kept haunting him—"Ada will marry money. She must."

The days and weeks sped, deepened into months, and brought on the early spring. Claude was a constant guest at Dale House, where there was always a knife and fork for him. He visited a good deal at other places too, notoriously at Pomona House; and nobody ever thought of coupling his name with Ada Parkinson, though many associated him with Clara Thornton; and Miss Tart at once took up the cudgels against him, and went forth on a special mission, trotting up and down Sturminster parish, declaiming against second marriages — as

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is sometimes the case when ladies have never been solicited to try a first.

"Don't fuss yourself, Tabitha," said Miss Souchong. "Marriages are made in heaven."

"Not second marriages, I'm sure. They are made where the divorces are, at the antipodes of heaven."

"Well, well, Tabitha. We shall never be troubled with one or the other."

"Don't be too sure of that, Sarah." Miss Tart had not given up hopes yet, though she would have gone to the stake sooner than confess the fact out of her own sisterhood.

At length it came, as these crises will come. Day by day the dictum—"Ada must marry money," had died out from his memory, and supreme above all else there supervened on his man's nature love for Ada. He was sorry to appear to violate hospitality, for Captain Parkinson was his close friend; but he was simply powerless beneath the spell of Ada's fascination.

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They met one day, among the budding violets and early primroses, in a sweet secluded woodland path that led from the overgrown village of Sturminster to the hamlet of Combe Dean. Leaves had just begun to gem the branches, and all told of renewed life. It was a balmy April day, the very resurrection-tide of the year, when Claude Vallance and Ada Parkinson met, as we nineteenth century pagans say, "by chance." Surely poor Miss Souchong's creed is a healthier one—that these matters are managed elsewhere, and others than ourselves arrange what too often seems only a chapter of accidents.

They paced the tangled path through Sturminster woods that spring morning, and talked, quite at random, on casual topics of the time and place, neither one nor the other making the faintest show of interest in what was being said; each transparently conscious that something far more serious, far more absorbingly interesting, was to come. Claude was not the man to beat

about the bush, or timidly and artificially lead up to his subject. He stopped suddenly at a point where a dash of shadow struck across the path; and, taking her unresisting hand, and calling her for the first time in their lives by her Christian name, he said—"Ada, the time has come for me to tell you I love you. You knew it, Ada, though, did you not?"

"Yes, Claude. I have known it a long time."

"And do you return my affection? Do you love me, Ada?"

"I might say, Do you not know that, Claude? But I will not answer you in a question, or leave you in doubt. I love you."

She was a shade paler than usual, and the big brown eyes opened wider than their wont, expressive of a surprise she deprecated. But she stood bold and erect, and her tiny lips were firm pressed as she said—

"I love you."

She had fancied it, hoped it, and at last



believed it; but now, faith was lost in fruition; she knew it—knew that the one person for whose affection she cared beside her father's loved her with his great soul. There were no great protestations; nothing but a quiet grasp of the hand and a passionate kiss there on that wildwood path, where there were none to see their love-pledge. They seemed to have gone back to old Eden legends again; all was so primitive, and one might almost have said so unromantic, in their troth-plighting. But it was, in very truth, the deepest romance of all. There was no artificiality. The awful word "engaged" was never uttered or dreamed of on either side. Yet there they stood, that spring morning, one in heart and soul, who had a few moments before been two. The utterance of a few simple words, the silent pressure of two hands, the voiceless greeting of their lips, and they were one in the face of heaven. Difficulties lay in their path, they knew; but they did not speak of them then. The words, "Ada must marry money,"

came echoing into Claude's consciousness ever and anon; but he stopped the reverberations for the time being by an exercise of his iron will. They passed to the frontiers of the Combe Dean territory, and there, by tacit and mutual consent, stood to say farewell. Not a syllable was said about "seeing papa." In the first place, the proposal would have been much too commonplace for them in their then state of exaltation; and, in the next, they knew those words involved a difficulty, and difficulties could have no place in their consideration to-day.

"Ada, darling," he said, holding the now ungloved hand, and fondling the little fingers, "you do not guess, you will not for years, perhaps, even after you are, body as well as soul, mine, guess what a moral revolution you have wrought in me to-day. The world has not been kind to me, and I have grown up hard——"

"O no, Claude, not hard——"

"Yes, my own, case-hardened, deliberately indurated by my own conscious act. I have

put from me, with more or less effort, all softening influences; for, as you truly say, my nature is not of itself hard. But my outside self—my false self, if you will—has been hardened; and now, in one respect at least, it can never be so again. The ‘falsar self’ has ‘slipt from me like a robe.’ I do not ask you will you ever love me thus, because I know you are not, like other girls, capricious and changeful. I know our mutual love—sudden as some may call it—has grown naturally. I know you will always love me.”

“Claude, I will be faithful to death.”

“*Ad mortem fidelis*,” he said dreamily; translating into Latin the beautiful motto she had almost unconsciously made her own. Let us always subscribe ourselves each thus—‘*ad mortem fidelis*’—‘faithful to death.’ Good-by; meet me at the same time and place to-morrow.”

Years after how those words came back to them both, and with them the woodland path where they were uttered, with the

belt of shadow in which they stood, and the glinting April sunshine out beyond. If we could only read the types and symbols which nature often scatters round our paths! Those old augurs who gave themselves to the study of these allegories might perhaps have anticipated much of our story, had they scanned that natural contrast of light and shade, those budding trees and spring flowers. But to those most concerned in them they were dark—only trees, and sunshine, and spring flowers; and, supreme over all—*young love*.

Ten minutes after they had parted, Mrs. Clara Thornton passed along the same path in the direction of Sturminster, radiant in bright garments, for which she had exchanged her weeds, in honour of the *Easter Festival*.





CHAPTER III.

STILL LIFE AT STURMINSTER.

STURMINSTER was one of those distressingly serene spots which leave you in a state of perplexity as to whether you shall call them overgrown villages or undersized country towns. They have many of the sins and sorrows of city life, and all the inconveniences of country society. To say that everybody knew everybody else's business in a general way, would be only to advance a truth which would apply equally to Bayswater or Kensington, or probably any portion of a great city. Very likely Bethnal Green has its gossips, and St. Giles's its social as well as police espionage. But in centres like Sturminster that knowledge of your neighbour's business, which

stands at the opposite pole of usefulness from self-knowledge, was concentrated into a focus. Asmodeus himself could not have excelled Miss Tart or the Reverend Cyprian Gules in knowledge of the affairs of Sturminster, down to such minute particulars as to what Mrs. Jones paid for her last new gown, or how many times the collector had to call on Brown for his rates.

When you had catalogued the rector and curate, the lawyer and the apothecary, whose trim villas starred round Sturminster with a halo of gentility, and when you had added the shopkeepers who supplied these with bread, beef, and grocery, in exchange for law, physic, and divinity, the *raison d'être* of the rest of Sturminster's two thousand population was a mystery hard to solve. The bulk of the poor were agricultural labourers, whose mission it was to reduce to order the chaos in which the primeval doom had left the lands of Clodshire like the rest of the globe; and there were a few eccentric individuals who appeared to have

singled out Sturminster as a residence, on the principle of making a solitude and calling it peace. Scandalmongers called it an old maid's paradise; but, between ourselves, the old spinsters had scarcely more to do with the gossip of Sturminster than the rest of the inhabitants, except that they had more time on their hands. Everybody gossiped. Sturminster would have been insupportable without gossip. Existence would have stagnated there but for this light and agreeable ripple on its surface.

The head-quarters and focus of the talkee-talkee was the meeting-house of a certain Dorcas Society, which assembled every Thursday at the houses of the members in turn, and where all the concerns, not only of the place, but of the universe, were discussed. "From grave to gay, from lively to severe," wandered the speech of this most discursive assembly of spinsters, in the literal sense of the word. Some were married, and some single; they were about equally divided, but each one assumed, by

a pleasant fiction, the avocation of a seamstress. They made the most unaccountable garments ostensibly for the poor; but their tongues ran more nimbly than their needles, and their talk is far more relevant to our present purpose than are the fearful and wonderful habiliments they concocted. Let us act Clodius at the mysteries of Bona Dea.

"So Mr. Vallance is coming to live in Sturminster, I hear," said Dorcas No. 1.

"I thought that girl at Combe Dean was showing her hand a little too plainly," suggested Miss Tart.

"What, little Ada Parkinson?" answered Miss Souchong. "Surely she does not set her cap at the new curate?"

"Still waters run deep," was the comment of the first Dorcas—a married lady, with six-and-thirty feet of marriageable commodities, in the shape of six scraggy and uncomely daughters, on her hands.

"All I can say is, he was there almost every other day," answered Miss Tart.

"The poor man was worried out of his life, and had to move in self-defence."

"The poor man had a will of his own, and needn't have gone there unless he liked, I suppose," replied Miss Souchong.

"What astonishes me most is, why Mr. Denton should have selected a Broad Churchman for the important sole charge of Combe Dean," said Ethel Villars.

Ethel was the only one of the Pomona House establishment who belonged to the Dorcas Society. She joined it because the Rev. Cyprian Gules sometimes came in, and read to the assembled Tabithas. She was working at an emblazoned offertory bag, and expecting her beloved Cyprian now.

"Having represented the High and Dry Church in his own person, and the Ritualistic party in his curate," rejoined Miss Tart, "the rector probably thought he would have one of the other party into which our beautiful State Establishment is broken up. It is the rector's way of being all things to all men——"

"That he may by all means save some," said Miss Souchong, parenthetically.

Miss Tart's account of ecclesiastical matters in Sturminster was quite a correct one. The rector was of the very highest and driest school of Anglican theology. He was of course a J.P., and, in fact, nothing more or less than a reverend squire; but he suited the tastes of the Sturminster people exactly. He liked his glass of port wine after dinner, preached remarkably short sermons, and was a good open-hearted, open-handed gentleman. The Rev. Cyprian Gules, on the other hand, was an advanced High Churchman; but as he wisely refrained from interfering with the Sunday services, and as nobody but the ladies went to church on weekdays, the rector let him have his swing then. He had a Gregorian choir, and wore coloured stoles—in fact, did all his soul listed on six days of the week, while on Sunday he went no further than half monotoning the prayers, which the congregation attributed to some affection of his nasal organ. Gules,

however, was a scholar and a gentleman too; and Mr. Denton thoroughly appreciated his good qualities, while he smiled in secret at his eccentricities. He was a capital parish priest; and when any poor souls fell ill, they preferred seeing Gules to the rector, much as they liked the latter while all was well with them.

"Let Gules have his fling," the rector used to say, "and then pick up a good wife. He has all the materials of a first-class parson in him."

Ethel Villars was, as we know, the prospective good wife, as far as outward and visible signs went; though Cyprian Gules gave himself out as a predestined celibate. Few people believed this destiny; and possibly none were more incredulous about it than himself and Ethel Villars.

"Mr. Gules is *not* a Ritualist," said Ethel, in answer to Miss Tart.

"So I've heard you say more than once before, my dear. I'm sincerely glad to hear it." Miss Tart was rather afraid of

Ethel, and knew that Cyprian was popular with the Dorcas Society ; so she said little, but thought the more.

Mrs. Evans, the Dorcas No. 1 alluded to above, and the six Misses Evans, each of whom had distant hopes that Cyprian might relax his vows of single blessedness in favour of herself, were staunch supporters of the curate, and made up rather a formidable contingent against Miss Tart. There was a peculiarity about these six Misses Evans that, for all practical purposes, they were one. They only seemed to have one mind, subdivided among their six colossal bodies. Whatever one thought or did the other five simply re-echoed or repeated. The life of a solitary Miss Evans was a mere ditto to that of her sisters. One often sees this reflex action in families that have not gone much into society, especially in out-of-the-way places like Sturminster.

A diversion was created in the proceedings of the Dorcas Society at this juncture by the entrance of the Rev. Cyprian Gules

himself. The ladies were all glad to see him, nor did they disguise the fact; and Ethel, looking languishingly at him, said—

“How late you are. We fancied you were not coming.”

“I have been seeing our new resident into his quarters.”

“Mr. Vallance?”

“Yes.”

“Where has he taken up his abode?” asked Miss Tart, who had been labouring like a female Paul Pry to discover what lodgings the Combe Dean Curate had taken.

“Where *do* you think?” replied Cyprian. “But there, you would never guess. He has gone to board at the Mitre.”

“Board at a public-house!”

“Well, you would scarcely call the Mitre a public-house. Let us, for the credit of Sturminster, call it an hotel. Yes; he has taken up his abode for the present at the Mitre. I have a notion he means to take a house,” added the Curate.

"And that means matrimony, of course," insinuated Mrs. Evans, surveying her six virgins.

"Or, in other words, Ada Parkinson," snapped out Miss Tart.

"Now, please don't say or think that, Miss Tart," said Cyprian, mysteriously; "I particularly ask you not to think such a thing. I am not speaking from authority," continued the Curate, in a tone exactly calculated to make people think he was; "but I believe Mr. Vallance has removed from his old quarters, which were nearer to his church, simply to break off the connexion with the Parkinsons."

"Didn't I tell you the girl was setting her cap at him?" by Miss Tart, parenthetically.

"Wrong again, Miss Tart. I meant to imply nothing of the kind. You know, in a little place like this people talk."

"They do," said Miss Clutchong, and sniffed suggestively.

"And they had got to know of Vallance's

name with Miss Parkinson's in a way that was disagreeable, not I fancy to him or to her so much as to Captain Parkinson; and principally for that reason, I believe, my brother Curate undergoes the agony of an exodus. Avowedly he comes to Sturminster in order to be in readier communication with London. He is, as you know, a literary man."

"Isn't he awfully Broad, Mr. Gules?" asked Ethel. "We were discussing that point before you came in."

"To be politic, I ought to ask at what conclusion you arrived before I answered. I should say Mr. Vallance was a Broad Churchman in doctrine, with a decided penchant for an ornate ritual."

"What a conglomeration!" said Miss Tart, who was next door to a Dissenter, and sympathized with none of the different shades of thought that surrounded her in Sturminster. There was, at the time of writing, no Dissenting chapel in the place. The people took Church matters as things

of course ; and Mr. Denton, at all events, was not likely to cause a secession.

" Is he a marrying man, should you think ?" inquired poor Mrs. Evans, gazing down the long file of her daughters. The worst of it would have been an aspiring swain would have had virtually to take the half dozen.

" Decidedly, I should say so."

Meanwhile Claude Vallance, whose movements were causing so much interest among the Dorcas Society in general, and the six Misses Evans in particular, was, for reasons of his own, shifting his quarters from Combe Dean to Sturminster with the ease and celerity of a Bedouin striking his tent, and often looked in to Pomona House at luncheon time. He was essentially a gregarious animal, and above all hated feeding alone. The process of feeding at all, he was wont to say, he considered *infra dig.*, and submitted to under protest from sheer necessity. He was a popular man at present ; in fact, the curates generally were among

the hospitable Sturminster folks, and there were already two or three houses at which he knew he was always welcome.

His engagement with Ada was still a secret. Both he and his lady-love were partially to blame for this. Ada dreaded a scene with her papa; and Claude's early experiences had got him into the way of "drifting," letting things take their course, and hoping they would turn out all right. His was one of those sanguine, buoyant natures, on the whole, whose elation sometimes alternates with despondency; but at all events, as far as outsiders could see, the hilarious element predominated. Some people wondered whether he ever could be bored. "You should see me when my fidgety fit is on me," Claude used to say; "I am an utterly different being." And so he was.

But the fidgety fits came few and far between as the spring deepened into summer, and cemented his secret engagement with Ada. They had the most hair-

breadth escapes of meeting with papa, who loved to moon about the woods and fields, making believe that he was engaged in going somewhere or doing something. They are a terrible trial to secret lovers are these unoccupied papas. At the same time, it never occurred to Claude or Ada that they were doing anything wrong in thus concealing the truth. They were going to make a clean breast one of these days, only the present was so delicious that they did not like running the risk of changing it.

"I wish it was over," Ada would say, almost every time they met; alluding to the dread interview with the old man.

"So should I; and it very soon should be if I were more sanguine as to the result. Let us enjoy the summer, and wait for the sad sere autumn days before we run the risk of parting."

"Parting, Claude?"

"Did it never strike you that this would be the result of an adverse decision on your father's side?"

"No; I never thought of that. Do you mean to say he would separate us?"

"Clearly, yes. What else could he do, if he refused his consent? Shall I see him soon, Ada?"

He smiled as she cried, "No, no!" and clung more closely to him; and there was no more talk of seeing papa throughout a long summer morning's ramble.

Of course the Combe Dean gossips knew all about those stolen interviews. Indeed, everybody seemed to know about them except the one person who fancied himself interested in finding them out. He simply had not a suspicion. He fancied Claude was a sworn celibate, and far too much occupied with writing and preaching to think of love-making.

It would have been as difficult, perhaps, to find a properly assignable reason for Claude's sudden migration from Combe Dean to Sturminster, as for his ever coming to Sturminster at all. It was possibly little more than his own impulsive way of doing

things. If a desire for rest really made him shoot off from London to the little Clodshire village, it might have been something in the way of reaction that led him back to the society of some few of his fellow-creatures again. But the lovers settled it in solemn conclave one evening, as a deep strategic move calculated to throw everybody off the scent about the attraction at Combe Dean. They did not quite like to say this, but they thought it, and each knew that the other thought it too. Claude persuaded himself that he was tired of the society of Kate and her continual little loins of mutton; and Ada actually said—

“You know, Claude dear, you do want society sometimes, when you are not with us. You will find it in Sturminster; only mind you don’t flirt with Clara Thornton. She is an immense admirer of yours.”

“Flirt with Miss Tart!” was his rejoinder. “No; I’ve quite enough to do in the flirting way, as folks would call it; for

remember, they don't know there is anything more serious between us yet."

And he kissed the winsome face as he had kissed it that spring day in the Combe Dean woods, when his fate was sealed; and many and many a time since, there and elsewhere, if the truth must be told.

"Claude, how awfully imprudent you're getting!" said Ada. "Didn't you see that man riding along the road?"

"Some farmer cogitating the price of oats, and blind to our billing-and-cooing," he replied.

"It's nothing of the kind, but somebody who can get us into trouble at Sturminster, if he likes. It's Oliver Jones, Mr. Villars's clerk or secretary, or whatever he calls himself. He will tell Mrs. Thornton, depend upon it."

"Let him by all means. But I say, Ada, they must imbibe a deal of stomachic ale in Combe Dean, or require a great many calls before they pay their bills.

That fellow is always riding up and down these lanes."

"Mrs. Thornton has put him to act the spy upon us, depend upon it," said Ada, laughing. "Oliver Jones is said to be in love with me, you know."

"Indeed! then we are rivals, are we? Shall I go after him and pulverize him?"

Claude did not go after the little fellow and demolish him, as he was inclined to do; but both he and Ada thought more of these frequent visits than they cared to say to each other.

Jones was one of those nondescript creatures found in most circles — a little sharp-faced, weasel-looking fellow, who gets on by insinuating himself into other people's secrets, and uses unmercifully the power he thus gains when the time comes. He had made himself indispensable to George Villars, who was just one of those "huge but imperfect organisms" as the Autocrat of the Breakfast-table calls them, who lay themselves open to such operators

as the Joneses. Villars fancied at the same time that he was utilizing "little Jones," as he termed him, most cleverly; while all the world—that is, all the microcosm of Sturminster—felt that Jones was only biding his time, and would give his herculean master a sly poke under the fifth rib one of these days. But the time had not come yet, at all events. He was obsequious to his employer, and found it suit his own interests to develop those of the stomachic ale. There was a rumour that Jones had been a lawyer either *in esse*, or at all events *in posse*. His enemies—and he had a good many in Sturminster and the neighbourhood—said he had been struck off the rolls. His friends averred—according to authentic information derived from Jones himself—that his straitened circumstances either prevented his passing his examination or impeded his subsequent practice. He was a model of a County Court lawyer, several grades below the Old Bailey type; but he traded on his

legal reputation so far as to travel about the streets of the little place in constant company with a blue merino bag, containing nobody knew what; but his cruel little pig's eyes sat too close together, and his sharp, upturned nose made one feel the bag must hold distress-warrants, which he was going to serve in person. A tall colossal steed was his perquisite at the brewery, and he rode it constantly after his own Cockney fashion, provoking the criticism of Sturminster by the amount of daylight he allowed to be visible beneath his coat-tails, and seeming to feel a savage pleasure in punishing something big for the scorn that was heaped by his fellow-creatures upon his own puny frame. Among the sorrows that overlie creation we scarcely estimate the secret grief felt by these undersized people. They are snubbed by the female sex, spoken of as "little So-and-so" by their own. They are living proofs of the Darwinian theory, as to the dying-out of the inferior types; but they die hard, and often cause a deal of

trouble in the process. Of the two, Oliver Jones hated Claude Vallance more than he did George Villars, because he felt Claude was bigger in mind as well as body than himself; and he was on that account more distressingly polite to him than even to the big-boned brewer.

But Mr. Oliver Jones has gone on his way rejoicing, with the sunlight glinting between his saddle and coat-tails; while Ada and Claude succeed in driving him very quickly from their memories. That, again, is a characteristic of these imperfect specimens of creation. They are as soon removed from recollection by an intellectual, as they would be either kicked or otherwise expelled from a room by a physical process.

Combe Dean was rich in woods, which skirted the whole roadside between the hamlet and Sturminster; grand old woods, that were the very locale for such lovers' walks as we are now describing, but the road through which was so winding and

tortuous as to render interruptions from passers-by very dangerous. Not that there were many travellers along that by-road, or among the woodland paths, but when they did come they were apt to pop on one un-awares. These woods had always been a great delight to Claude; he felt in them a pleasure it would have been difficult to analyse or explain. Even before he knew Ada, and when first he came to Combe Dean, he wandered about amid the bare leafless branches and giant boles, picturing what they would be like in their summer garniture—yes, even as he now recollected, imagining how delicious they would be if, in their great desert-like expanses, he could feel himself alone, except “one fair spirit for his minister.” He had realized the double picture now.

“I often fancy, darling,” he said, dreamily, as they paced that sylvan path on another occasion, “that I have the power of anticipation, which is even stronger than those flashes of consciousness which tell us we

have been in certain places and situations before the present time, in the depths of some indefinite past. That there is such a double consciousness I am sure, and it is prophetic as well as simply reminiscent. Have you ever felt this?"

"Never; or only very slenderly, at all events. I have often felt that consciousness of the past, but never to any extent the anticipation of the future. It would be immensely convenient if it could be relied on. Papa, for instance——"

"Still harping on your father! I fancy it could be relied on, like any other faculty, if we trained it. I anticipated *this*," he said, stopping and taking both hands in hers and looking into her happy face, "before I knew you. I seemed to know I should find the lacking half of myself and wander these woods, one soul in bodies twain, as you see I am doing." He spoke as though her little existence were absorbed into his own capacious nature.

"It is what I have wanted, Ada, all my

restless life. I have longed for rest. It is the feeling good worried people have about heaven. It is no doubt a type, a foreshadowing of future repose in a higher state of existence; but at present I am resting in the earthly type, and cannot realize even an aspiration beyond."

"Do you think, Claude," asked Ada, for she loved to catechize him on these subjects, "that our present feeling for each other is any guarantee that we shall be together hereafter?"

"I do most certainly, or sympathy, under which I include love—that fellow-feeling which makes us so wondrous kind—would be a waste in the universe. I find if I have a faculty in my nature that there is a use for that faculty, and somewhere or other in the universe of space the proper object on which to exercise it."

"But will the exercise endure?"

"In the inferior types of action there is no reason why it should; but—to shift the ground from love for a moment, where we

may be excused for fearing lest the wish is father to the thought—I often feel this with regard to my reading, my acquisition of knowledge. Is it any use, I often asked myself when I looked along the shelves of the British Museum Library, for me to go grubbing among these books? If I spent a lifetime, as it seemed probable then I should, in storing up their treasures, all I could do would be but as a grain on the seashore or a drop in the ocean. I should want existence after existence to assimilate and use even what I saw there. And I believe, too, that because I should want—shall want—existence after existence, I shall have existence after existence, or I should consider my toil thrown away. But the very pleasure and zest I feel in the toil assure me that it is not time and energy consumed in vain.”

“And do you think this applies to love, and to—to us?”

“I do. Small poser, will you think I am blarneying? I have felt before now fits and

starts of passion. I adored like most youngsters a butcher's daughter as old again as myself with oily curls. I have been desperate at dances, and felt my heart gone from me—*pro tem.*—at picnics. But it was *only pro tem.* I knew at the time and in the very depths of my desperation that it was not permanent. The case is different now. When first I spoke to you and you answered my instinctive utterance at that Stomachic ball last Twelfth-night, a magnetic impetus seemed to take me straight into communion with you. Our spirits spoke, Ada. Our tongues only twaddled. I knew then, though I protested against the knowledge, that this would come."

They were now walking in the most dangerous of Faust-and-Marguerite attitudes. Their pose would have been a treasure for Miss Tart to see and circulate, or for Oliver Jones to save up for emergencies.

"You protested?"

"Yes. My better nature, my truer self

bore me on to *this* in spite of the active protestations of my lower nature."

"You feel sure it was the truer self, not the lower nature that bore you to this?"

She knew it quite well; he was only putting into words her own experiences; but she liked to hear him say it over and over again: and over and over again he said it, for he too liked the saying as she the hearing; and the saying and the hearing brought them, as it ever did, back to the old motto of "*Ad mortem fidelis.*"

"I should say *post mortem fidelis*—faithful after death—except that the adage has rather an anatomical sound about it, and except too that I feel certain, as I have told you, that love like ours on this lower plane of life certifies and assures mutual life and love beyond."

These were the topics Claude loved to handle in the pulpit and in conversations with those he cared to converse with—the probabilities of future sympathetic existence,

and the reflex action of such a faith on present life and duty. Here he felt was ground for belief and motive-power of action which lay at the bottom of the creeds, not only of Christendom but of the world, which gave them the good which all in various degrees possessed, and which was compatible with any and every form of expression, however divergent in faith and practice.

They had just emerged from their woodland path on to the main road, which would bear them into Sturminster in one direction, or back to Combe Dean in the other. One instant and they would have turned towards Combe Dean, but they heard a footstep approaching from the Sturminster direction, and felt they would rather face their foes than be followed by them. A sharp turn of the road brought them at once vis-à-vis, and each exclaimed below their breath—

“Captain Parkinson!”

“Papa!”

As fate would have it they were equal to the emergency. Claude's face assumed a calmness he was far from feeling, and Ada's confusion was only temporary. A shade of surprise—it might have been of suspicion—passed over the cheery visage of the old soldier; but that too was momentary, and he said in his blindest tones—

“I am flattered. You have come to meet me, and bear me home to the repast for which I am so particularly well prepared. But where did you foregather, children, and was the idea a separate one or due to deliberation? Anyhow I am flattered at being the object of your attentions.”

“We met,” said Claude, “and resolved on joint action in this matter.”

“I thought you were lost, papa, and was seriously thinking of dragging the ponds.”

“Considering you knew I had gone to see Atkins, I don't know how you could expect me earlier. In fact, I have had the greatest difficulty to escape from the Squire's hospitality. He feels the time hang, I fancy,

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at his big house, and wanted me to relieve the monotony."

Much as she loved her father, Ada felt it would only have been kind had he stopped to remove the solitude of the bachelor squire instead of spoiling their walk. How devoutly she thanked Providence, though, that the Faust-and-Marguerite attitude had been opportunely exchanged for one more in keeping with the high road.

"I am going to strike off here, sir," said Claude, as they came to a cross-road. "I have a visit to pay."

"You will come in afterwards," said the Captain, "as usual."

"Thanks, not to-day. After parochial work I have a good deal of writing to do."

"Slave of the lamp, eh?"

"I am afraid it will prove so to-night."

And as he said a formal good-by to Ada, he could not help feeling the Captain had let him off more easily than usual. He was wont to be rather a pressing host.

"Wonderful combination of opposed ele-

ments is that fellow Vallance," remarked the Captain, as they both watched him down the lane. "I cannot think what makes him prison himself in a Clodshire village. Can you, Ada?"

Ada thought she could, but held her tongue.

"He could make his mark in London either as a preacher or a writer; indeed, seems to have done so in one capacity at least, and yet he chooses to bury himself here. I suppose he's saving up for some grand coup. Do you think he is, Ada? *What* are you thinking of, girl?"

"I am thinking that Mr. Vallance has just told me he is going to preach in Sturminster next Sunday, I believe for the first time; and I should not wonder if that is the effort for which he is reserving himself, and on which he means to waste the midnight oil. Let us go and hear him, papa."

"We will go by all means, for old Denton or Gules, who would replace him here, would be simply unbearable. I have got

to like that young fellow's strong common sense in the pulpit. But I don't believe he cares enough for the Sturminster people to make an effort on their behalf."

"I believe Mr. Vallance always tries to do even the smallest thing he undertakes in the best possible way, papa," added Ada, blushing to find herself Claude's apologist.

"A very excellent rule of life—for a curate," said the Captain, laughing, as they passed the portal of their little house; "but I wish the fellow had come to dinner. I am wearied with Atkins's eternal talk about horses and cows, and should have liked a change. By the way, child, can't you charm that bucolic squire? He has lots of money, and you could——"

"Spend an existence in talking of horses and cows," rejoined Ada, laughing merrily as she ran upstairs to her room.





CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE SERMON.

FAIR critic would have found an illustration of her adage—"Men were deceivers ever"—in the circumstance that Claude Vallance, on leaving the Captain and Ada at Combe Dean, sped first of all, indeed, to his new abode at the Mitre, when he ought, according to the excuse he made to the Parkiusons, to have spent his evening and night in consuming the nocturnal oil. This he did not do; nor was there any symptom of the anchorite or midnight student in the course which he substituted. He went to Pomona House, and passed a remarkably pleasant evening: while, as no invitation came to him subsequently to his arrival at Sturminster, and he was so busy that he had not time to

make up his mind after his arrival at the Mitre, we must presume that he had already decided on his course when he said good-by to his love.

There was something in the wealthy Bohemianism of the brewer's house which exactly suited Claude, though for other reasons than did the same element in Captain Parkinson's little ménage. Could he have been content to take one of the spare Misses Villars with her enticing dower, all might have gone smoothly enough with him, and he could have realized what he was wont to give out as the acme of his ambition, unlimited power of doing the *dolce far niente*, and writing for fame or as caprice inclined him instead of for daily bread, and often under stress of uncongenial circumstances. To say that Pomona House had quite lost all hope of such a disposition of things would be scarcely true, though the various representatives of that establishment knew the growing scandal about the little Combe Dean lady, and treated it each in his or her

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peculiar way. They had been talking about it, in fact, up to the very moment of Claude's arrival, and each regarded it from a different standpoint. Mr. Villars would not believe that a man of the world would make such a fool of himself as to take a penniless girl, when the world of Sturminster heroines was "all before him where to choose." "Though we did make a mistake ourselves in our young days, mother," he said to Mrs. Villars, who was by, and who, not being posted up quite so well in the Sturminster gossip as some people, thought that her Ethel or Emily must certainly have more attractions for Claude than the little simpering Miss at Combe Dean. She was so unconscious of being little and simpering herself, that her own victory over the prudent brewer did not strike her as at all a precedent that Claude might follow. Emily and Ethel did not enter warmly into the discussion. One was preoccupied with Mr. Gules; the other had not quite forgotten the literary conversation with Miles Denton on the night of

“Mr. Vallance will marry Miss Parkinson, mark my words,” said little Jones, who was spending the evening at Pomona House, heavily got up in a dress suit, while all the rest displayed the most perfect abandon in their attire. “Or if he don’t he ought to.”

"O yes, a many. You should hear the village gossips talking about it. It's the subject at every public where I go for orders."

Jones never could leave the shop alone, and distressed everybody but the brewer himself by the pertinacity with which he brought the Stomachic Ale to the front on all occasions. Whether he did it from an honest zeal in business, feeling his own pros-

pects bound up in a degree with Villars's, or as a sly hint to the family that he did not forget the source of their success, Clara never could make out, and Mrs. Thornton had her own reasons for feeling a good deal of interest in this small specimen of humanity.

"It must be very heart-rending, Mr. Jones," she added in a tone of light badinage, calculated to let him know she was in possession of his secret too, "for you to see another billing-and-cooing with the little Combe Dean lady. We know your penchant in that quarter."

It was a palpable hit, and told exactly as Mrs. Thornton meant it to.

Soon afterwards Claude's ring and Claude's step on the threshold were recognised; and when he came in and deposited himself easily in his own peculiar chair, and talked cheerfully with every one about their own particular subjects, he seemed to be so thoroughly at home, and was such a welcome addition to the Pomona House circle, that for the

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moment nobody, except perhaps the little legal gentleman, remembered any of the tittle-tattle that had just taken place, nor did Claude appear to harbour his recent design of pulverizing even that fragment of human kind.

"Do you know, Mrs. Thornton," he said, addressing himself, as was not unfrequently the case, to Clara, "I feel positively nervous as to next Sunday's ordeal. I am to share the services at Sturminster with Mr. Gules, and the Rector takes my duty for the day at Combe Dean. Why should he make me leave those few sheep in the wilderness and migrate to the green pastures of Sturminster? I must actually write a sermon. I talk to the people at the little village church, you know."

"Oh yes; but don't preach extempore here," said Ethel, "please, Mr. Vallance. It's so like the Dissenters."

"Mr. Vallance, I'm sure, won't put himself out of the way on Sturminster's account," replied Mrs. Thornton. "It's

only a way he has of expressing unlimited contempt for Sturminster criticism."

"Chaff," added little Jones, parenthetically, by way of explanation, and Claude treated his small sneer with the most superb disdain.

"Believe me, Mrs. Thornton, I am not such a prig as to scorn any criticism," he answered. "I do not, for one moment, adopt the so-called sacerdotal theory about pulpit 'instruction.' Supposing that, from some years of study, I have a handful more secular knowledge than some of my hearers—I mean those whom Mr. Gules would call his 'poorer brethren'—what then? Do we not see every day conceited bookworms in the pulpit who miss their object, supposing them to have one, by not knowing how to dish up their viands?"

"Take my advice, Mr. Vallance," said George Villars; "write no sermon. Talk to them just as you're talking to us now. Sturminster sadly wants a little common sense in the pulpit. Mr. Denton is a capital

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fellow out of Coward's Castle ; but he talks a different language when he gets there from what he does when he buttonholes you in Sturminster High Street, and discusses the latest improvement on his glebe, or the ruling prices in the market."

"We'll compromise the matter, I think," said Claude, "by doing as many parsons do in London ; that is, I will preach a written sermon in the morning and 'orate' in the evening. Miss Ethel can stop away from the evening service, and," he added, "slily, "I shall be very glad to relieve Mr. Gules by taking the prayers as well as the sermon, if he likes."

In the course of the evening the different members of the Pomona House circle disposed of themselves as they thought proper, for they were, as little Mrs. Villars took upon herself to say, "only a family party ; we don't make strangers of you, Mr. Vallance and Mr. Jones." Claude had a pipe with George Villars. The girls and mamma busied themselves with those nominal occu-

pations which ladies are so skilled in inventing; and once, for a little while, Clara Thornton and Oliver Jones found themselves alone. Jones never went to the smoking-room. It made him cough.

Clara put down her magazine, and Jones his book; and they proceeded to business.

"So you met them again this morning?" asked the lady.

"Again! They're at it every day now."

"And all the world—I mean all the village gossips—know it?"

"If they don't, I tell 'em. All except Captain Parkinson."

"Why don't you tell him?"

"I can't get at him. To tell you the truth, he snubs me whenever I approach him."

"Do you suppose he knows anything of your feeling for his daughter?"

"I can't help thinking he does. Why should he snub me else?"

"Why, indeed!" repeated Clara, suggestively. She looked very handsome, though her brow was knitted, and her hand toyed

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nervously with some trinket she wore round her neck while she discussed schemes with her uncongenial companion.

"Wouldn't it be a capital foil to your own intentions if you could let the Captain know this? Why don't you write to him?"

"As a lawyer I hate letters. Even anonymous ones are dangerous in a place like this, where everybody knows everybody else's business—and handwriting."

"If I wrote one—or got one written—would you post it?"

"Or have it posted? Yes. In London. You make me a catspaw. I make somebody else."

"I don't in the least object to the term if you like to apply it to yourself," rejoined the lady. "Only very few men would, you know." She made not the slightest secret of the loathing she felt for the instrument she was using; and as long as he knew he was furthering his small interests, Jones cared no jot what she or the rest of the world thought of him.

"Did they see you? What were they doing?"

"Unfortunately they did see me. And they were a-kissing as usual. Curse him."

"I wouldn't swear," she said, contemptuously. "It isn't usual. Circumvent him, and leave the other process to time——"

"Or eternity."

"Or eternity. Only circumvent him."

Gradually the rest of the circle reassembled, joined at last by Claude and George Villars. Mr. Jones relapsed into study, and Mrs. Thornton gave herself up to conversation with the Curate as lightly and easily as though no dream of "circumvention" had ever crossed her mind.

Those who had fathomed the secret of little Jones's attachment to Ada Parkinson, thought the Captain must have concealed property or unclaimed dividends somewhere, and that Jones knew of them. They could not realize the idea of those small pigs' eyes really languishing for love on a pretty face. But if love subdues a Hercules like Claude

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Vallance, he also displays his power by sometimes lighting up the embers of an apparently dead heart such as Jones's. Oliver had no ulterior, no interested motive in his hopeless love for Ada Parkinson. Hopeless it was, because not only was he well acquainted with the Captain's adage, "Ada must marry money," but he also knew that she loathed him. He had once or twice, on the rare occasions when they met, tried to make himself agreeable, but succeeded in becoming so much and so evidently the reverse, that he gave up the attempt as far as any outward and visible signs went, and even stopped away from the ball on Twelfth Night lest he should betray himself. But he plotted none the less in his little domicile over the counting-house, or as he rode quietly on his tall steed among the Clodshire lanes. Now he had Clara Thornton as his ally, and hope revived in his pigeon breast.

In the meantime Sunday came round with its accustomed regularity, and Stur-

minster assembled en masse to hear the Combe Dean "pa'son" hold forth. The fame of his pulpit powers had reached the inhabitants, though dimly and at a distance, as Aristotle says the fortunes of the living influence the dead. It certainly never so far affected the Sturminster folk as to make more than half a dozen take a Sabbath-day's journey to Combe Dean; but among these was the proprietor, editor, and manager of the *East Clodshire Gazette* (these three being one), who reported a sermon from time to time in his columns when news failed him in Clodshire; and also a talkative cobbler—are not cobblers always conversational?—who appreciated Claude's power for saying ten consecutive words in the pulpit without looking at his book. Had sects existed in Sturminster, this cobbler would have been the first heresiarch; but they were the dear, soporiferous old days, before "religious differences" existed, or anybody required to be put down by a double-barrelled and

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two-edged Public Worship Regulation Bill.

Earliest on the ground—that is, in church—that Sunday morning were the half dozen Misses Evans and Ethel Villars, the latter being considerably after the others, who were waiting when the sexton opened the doors. These and some six or seven other energetic ladies, officered by Gules and an awakened shopman, were in the habit of assembling every Sunday morning before the bells did ring, and teaching a few ragged little urchins in one of the side aisles. There was no schoolroom, the education of the district being carried on as yet by dames, while School Boards loomed in the far distance, and denominationalism deemed secular knowledge for the lower orders subversive of the constitution. What else had caused the French Revolution? It was not secular learning, but the Church Catechism, which the ladies taught these little disciples amid the temple aisles; and many a weary tale of woe might have been

told in reference to poor brainless cloddlings, trying to master the mysteries of the contents of the Lord's Prayer (that terrible "I desire, my Lord God," &c.), or their duty to God and their neighbour; while the senior class, verging on confirmation, were duly instructed in the sevenfold Sacraments by Gules, and reminded that "two only as *generally* necessary to salvation" meant that the other five were specially necessary. Gules felt himself very "advanced" as he trotted out this and other little heresies every Sunday morning to the admiration of the Dorcas ladies and the converted shopman. The catechetical exercises were brief on this particular morning however, and the Misses Evans were all in their pew, each with a large Bible for reference close at hand, and a Prayer-book with a cross on the cover prominently displayed, even before the sexton, standing in the belfry under the western porch, began to perform a solo on the long rope which hung there, the frayed end whereof looked so like a

worn fiddle-string on a large scale, and provoked the wonder of the released disciples as to its connexion with the funereal bell high up in the steeple knolling the Sturminster people to church. Gules retired to the vestry for religious exercises, and the congregation drifted together in that fortuitous-concurrence-of-atoms fashion usual on such occasions. Among the earlier comers were Misses Tart and Souchong, each of whom installed herself in a little pew, where her maiden charms would not come into contact with the rest of humanity: though the latter did hint to the sexton's wife, as she bolted her in, that she might put anybody genteel into her pew "at a pinch." Miss Tart had a lock on her door inside, and smiled maliciously as she turned the key upon the outer world. Pomona House had a square compartment—we had almost written apartment—in the centre of the middle aisle, carpeted and hassocked, with a table for the books; but its only occupant for some

time was Mr. Oliver Jones, who looked quite shrunken and shrivelled amid its capacious dimensions. Squire Atkins, who rode in "to town"—it was so they said of Sturminster—and put his horse up early at the Mitre, had a gallery all to himself wedged into an arch, from the centre of which he looked through a sort of sash window upon the inferior worshippers while he waited. Brabazon Lodge had another such elevation, curtained carefully off from all the rest; and one could only judge by an occasional flutter of the hangings that Brabazon Lodge was represented on that occasion. There was a private staircase to the select pew, and the sexton's wife was pledged to secrecy. It did transpire, however, that Mrs. Tuft Hunter was seen going Sturminster way that Sunday morning, and she might have been sent once more to reconnoitre on the occasion of such an event as a new preacher. Miles Denton was, for the time being, the only occupant of the Rector's pew. He had

heard a rumour that Claude was a Broad Churchman, and considered it the distinguishing mark of a young University man to ape those principles on his own account, not that he knew much about them; but they had become fashionable at his college, which once was Simeonite to the backbone; then had a turn at Tractarianism; and now went in for any amount of Rationalism. Mrs. Denton was a mild Evangelical, with whom Mr. Ryle's tracts took the place of the Talmud to an orthodox Jew in reference to the Law of Moses. Mr. Ryle and one or two other tract-writers supplemented for her both the Law and the Gospel. She was a Moody-and-Sankeyite before Moody-and-Sankeyism, and accompanied her liege lord to Combe Dean, not from any sense of wifely duty, or because she found much to "feed upon" (as she phrased it) in the marital discourses, but because she had heard Claude Vallance spoken of as a writer; and she held that clergymen should never write anything but

sermons, tracts, and goody books. The rumour that he had written a play for the Clapham Theatre, or even that there was a theatre at pious Clapham, she would rather not believe until she was obliged to.

The congregation, then, was an unusually large one, for a fresh preacher at Sturminster was a rarity, and as far as report went, it spoke well of Claude's pulpit powers; not that the Clodshire people went in greatly for preaching. They did not, indeed, go in very eagerly for anything. There was a good deal more of the static than the dynamic in the Clodshire constitution; and in the special matter of sermons they rather submitted to them as they did to the rates and taxes, and scarcely felt a deeper interest in the capacities of a preacher than the idiosyncrasies of the collector. They liked the former to be brief, just as they preferred the latter to be patient.

The service went on as usual, except that Gules, in the absence of the Rector, pitched his note a little higher than usual in the

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prayers, taking his G fork out of his pocket, and striking it on the desk before he began, moving the wonder of the school-children as he did so. Not one of those juveniles but would have given all he or she possessed to get that instrument, and beguile the irksomeness of church or school by perpetual tootle-tooings. Claude shocked Gules in the vestry awfully by refusing a cassock and simply assuming his black gown there and then, with a triangular half-yard of shirt-front visible. Thus habited, he sat with Miles Denton in the Rector's pew when the organist played the little procession of two into church with "See the conquering hero comes." This was meant as a compliment to Claude. He was the Judas Maccabæus for the occasion.

"I don't want any help, you know, Vallance; in fact, I rather like reading," said the fussy little Curate; "but don't you think it would look better if you put on a surplice and sat at the altar, even if you only read the Epistle?"

"No doubt it would, my dear fellow; and I know I am the most unæsthetic fellow breathing"—which he was not by any means—"but if you will excuse me, I would rather sit out. I want to think over my sermon, and take stock of the congregation."

"So be it"—that was Gules's pet phrase,—"so be it; but I shall be glad when we discard this academical gown altogether, and preach in the surplice."

There was a little flutter of excitement when Claude passed to the pulpit, as though the congregation wished to see whether he would climb up the rail, or do anything else eccentric. When they found he only went up in the usual way, and, after a collect, gave out the slightly commonplace text, "Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good," there was a tendency to get into the angles of the pews and put the feet comfortably on hassocks, while not a few shut their eyes by anticipation, feeling, no doubt, that they could think better when their

senses were closed to the outer world. By a remarkable coincidence, however, they opened them wide again with one consent when the preacher began to talk to them from the pulpit. There was no sonorous phrase, no stilted language, yet, on the other hand, no affectation of a colloquial tone; but what every one felt was that they were being personally addressed.

Claude began by pointing out the close connexion of the two clauses one with the other, and how it was quite impossible that a man could hold fast what was good unless he had previously examined by such ability as God had given him the claims of other things upon his acceptance. That, said the preacher, was the essence of the Church of England system in a nutshell. It was the Church of Private Judgment, and so of Individual Responsibility, built up at the Reformation three hundred years ago, in opposition to the Catholic system, which told a man to ignore his own judgment, and to believe and to do just what he was told—nothing more or less.

Now, strangely enough, though Mr. Denton had not the smallest symptom of Catholic theology in his constitution, this latter was exactly the line he had always taken. In the summary of the Sturminster parishioner's duty towards his neighbour, he elevated into the chief of all possible cardinal virtues the submission to governors, teachers, spiritual pastors, and masters. No full-blown sacerdotalist could have been stronger on this point than the good old High-and-dry Rector was.

From an opposite point of view, and by an entirely different course, Mr. Gules arrived at the same end. Clodshire in particular and Christendom in general were to accept and do what "the Church" enjoined. Not the Bible; Gules rather ignored the "Protestant Scriptures." One day when Claude was calling on him, and wanted to polish up a sermon with a quotation, he asked Gules for a Bible. Gules had a fair library, especially of Anglo-Catholic theology; and, looking along the well-filled shelves, he said despair-

ingly, "I'm afraid you won't find one, my dear fellow. In fact, I don't think there's a Protestant Book among the lot."

Of course such a theology, or rather two such theologies as these, were just the ones to go to sleep under; and Clodshire had slumbered serenely for a century or so. There was, as has been said, no Dissent in Sturminster. Only the mildest kind of politics found its way into the little alehouses, or even into that which was to Sturminster what the Agora was to Athens, the bar of the Mitre; and then such discussions as did take place were tacitly influenced by the known character of the Rector's opinions. The Rector was true blue, or, in other words, Conservative to the point of stagnation, and Sturminster stagnated in sympathy. Arcadia had not been on strike then, and Dr. Kenealy and Joseph Arch had never crossed the orbit of these peaceful clods. What was Magna Charta to them, or what were they to Magna Charta?

But now they were suddenly roused from

their pleasant dreams by the stentorian voice of this young "pa'son," whose claim to oracular powers was based on the double fact that he came from London and was known to write in newspapers. They had considerable traditional respect for Mr. Denton and Cyprian Gules, but it was the respect which women and simple folk feel for the "cloth;" whilst here came in the stronger feeling which nine out of ten men, who have never been behind the scenes of a newspaper office, experience for any young man who, in current phraseology, "writes for the newspapers," or is supposed to be "on" a journal of any kind. The adoration of a *dévouée* for her pet priest is as nothing compared with the utter prostration and ascription of infallibility which the male worshipper exhibits towards a leader-writer, for whose opinion in his individual capacity he would not care two straws. We have shaken off Priestcraft, and substituted the Infallibility of the Press. The divinity that once did hedge a king has been trans-

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ferred to the editor of a penny newspaper.

Here, then, the oracle, which had already made itself heard at a select conclave or two at the Mitre, declared itself with double force in the pulpit at Sturminster in favour of Free Thought and individual responsibility. While touching tenderly on the claims of the hereditary creed, and the faith and prayer learnt at a mother's knee, Claude Vallance dwelt strongly upon the fact that these were not enough for sensible men to live and die by. They must, whether they liked it or not, think things out for themselves. If they chose to drift back to the old times, and be "like dumb driven cattle," to believe and do only what they were told by their parson or their squire, they must do it still on their own responsibility. They could not do it as a matter of course, like their forefathers, because the light had come to them—the new light of the nineteenth century—and woe be to them if they loved darkness better than the light!

Sturminster was wide awake now, and listening open-mouthed to this new doctrine. The Prince had come to rouse the Sleeping Beauty, and that fair Princess became at once preternaturally wide awake after her long siesta. The very school-children caught the contagion, and for the first time in their lives fulfilled their baptismal vow by hearing a sermon without being knocked on the head by the beadle's stick as a stimulus.

"Now that, Christian people," he said in conclusion, "is the view I want you to take of your religious duties. I want you to believe what you believe, and to do what you do, because you feel it is right, not because I tell you, or even because your Bible tells you. You have something within you far greater than Church or Bible—you have your own Conscience, which is the voice of God, or which Bishop Butler beautifully described as the "candle of God," within. Follow that. Treat a religious question exactly as you treat other

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questions in life. You bring to bear on them whatever judgment and ability God has blessed you with : do exactly the same with religious matters. Why should we make a difference between sacred and secular things? Everything is sacred to a saint of God, and all of us are called to be saints, called to be holy people, called to be good men, women, and children. You use all the faculties you have, and when these fail, you apply to others wiser than yourselves, or you look into a book of reference, or take time and think it out for yourselves. Do exactly the same in religion. When you fail to discover what things are good, what course of conduct to pursue—and very likely you will fail sometimes—come to your clergyman, ask what your Church tells you ; look into your New Testament and see what Christ says ; go to your bedroom and fall on your knees, and lay the whole matter before God and ask for guidance ; but don't fall into the error of thinking you can shirk the difficulty and

throw it on to the shoulders of your parson, or even credit the Church or the Bible with the error if you go wrong. God has given you free-will, and by your exercise of that great privilege you will be judged at last—that is, your character will be formed here on earth and stamped for ever in eternity. You can all see that this is only fair-play.”

Although there was not an actual heresy in this discourse to recommend it to the notice of the Sturminster critics, yet there was that which was almost as bad, or almost as great a recommendation—according to the point of view from which you regarded it—there was that originality, that putting old truths in a new light, which woke up Tom, Dick, and Harry, and set the superior class cackling for the rest of the Sunday. As for Gules, he sat on thorns, and felt that the last times had come; and Miss Tart unburthened her maidenly bosom to the congenial sympathies of the Curate as to this being the closing in of the dispensation. With a

certain class of thinkers, anything new, from railroads down to Moody-and-Sankeyism, is the closing in of a dispensation. It has been so long closing in that one begins to question the probability of its shutting up at all.

As for the rest of the hearers, Mrs. Tuft Hunter went to Brabazon Lodge with a glowing account of the new luminary, who was put on the dinner list forthwith—an event which had never happened in connexion with a curate before. “But then he’s literary, you know, my dear duchess;” and that, of course, settled the matter at once, though whether his literary talents ran in the direction of the *Quiver* or the *Saturday Review*, Mrs. Tuft Hunter or the duchess knew not. He wrote; that was enough. Squire Atkins, who had not forgotten Clara Thornton’s penchant for the new Curate, said the sermon was revolutionary; and the Misses Evans, to whom he imparted his opinion, were inclined to agree with him—for they had hopes in the direction of Shire

Hall. But the main body of the Dorcas Society had not declared itself as yet. It takes some time to make up half a dozen minds. Miles Denton, who, as a young University man, was bound to be progressive, thought it was "no end jolly," and only wished "the missis" had been there to have her Simeonite notions touched up a bit, you know. He and Miss Souchong struck up quite a friendship on the subject, when the old spinster hit the current of his thoughts by saying, "Isn't it charmingly dreadful, Mr. Denton?"

That was really a fair statement of the average Sturminster verdict. Hodge, liking a sermon for the first time in his life, felt as though he had been doing something wrong in listening, and made up his mind to go to church instead of the alehouse that evening. Sturminster proper—that is, middle-class Sturminster—would go too to hear what new heresy would be broached: the result was Claude had such a congregation as had never assembled before within

the walls of the fine old parish church. Gules could not bear it, so accepted his congé and sang Compline with Ethel in a private oratory she had set up in a disused pantry at Pomona House. It was a veritable Agape or Love-feast for the Curate and his young disciple; and they were half-disposed to bless Claude's heresies, though they pretended to think them dreadful, without being charming. But their appraisalment was pretty nearly the same as Miss Souchong's after all.

In the evening the sermon was of a different character. It possessed, like the morning's discourse, the merit of extreme brevity, and was quite extempore, Claude going into the pulpit without even a Bible or one of those surreptitious shreds of paper with notes on it which are adopted by some quasi-extempore preachers, just as nervous swimmers use corks. He gave a simple exposition of the raising of the little dead child to life, about whom the Master said, amid those who laughed Him to scorn, that she

was *not* dead but sleeping; that was the text—"Not dead, but sleeping." "*They* are not dead," said Claude, pointing out through the mullioned windows, where the setting sun was casting long shadows of memorial crosses and lighting up the mounds of the humbler graves. "They are not dead, though their worn-out bodies are sleeping in the quiet cemetery of God's Acre. When those disused tabernacles fell down like cast-off garments, their spirits at once lived and stood erect before God what their worldly probation had made them. There was, I believe, not an instant's pause—probably no suspension of consciousness. You, who stood by their deathbeds, recollect how they talked of angels and dear ones gone before. You said they were wandering. They were not. They saw them. The blessed ones were with them. They are with us too—now, here, at this moment, in the old familiar place where they were so often with us, when we could see them with our bodily eyes. That," he urged, "was

the strongest sanction of all for Christian duties, love for the so-called dead, and hopes of reunion with them."

Claude made his mark again with the majority of his congregation. This seemed exactly the sermon to suit them, as he preached it amid the dim shadows of the Gothic arches at eventide, just as the other was for the garish light of day. Miss Tart represented pretty well the critical faculty of the congregation, saying, as she let herself out of her square deal box, "Pretty well for one day, my dear, isn't it? We've demolished the Universal Church in the morning, and done away with the Day of Judgment in the evening."

There was even more lingering than usual among the gravestones in the churchyard that night, some of the congregation taking long furtive looks at the green mounds, as if to ask whether truth had been told them about the dear ones they had pictured sleeping below to be raised up at some indefinite period angels or devils.

Were they living *now*, hovering round them now and here?

George Villars waited at the vestry door to carry Claude off in triumph to supper at Pomona House; and, as the two men passed down the little street among the knots of loiterers, Clara Thornton felt herself repeating a former ejaculation of her own—

“*That a curate!*”

By mutual consent between herself and Claude, Ada Parkinson had given up coming to Sturminster that Sunday, though the Captain still protested vigorously against being subjected to the tender mercies of “that old prig Denton.” But Ada brought forward that unanswerable argument—a headache; and if the guileless old Captain had ever cherished the idea of any proclivity on her part towards the Curate, it would have been effectually dispelled by this act of abstinence, which thus exactly answered its end in reference to himself and the Sturminster gossips on whose behalf it had been undertaken.



CHAPTER V.

STURMINSTER IN STORM.

CLARA THORNTON was eminently the ideal of what one would term a fine woman. That expression often, it is true, represents an exceedingly coarse woman, when it expresses mere bulk ; but, though cast in the mould of an Amazon, Clara never impressed one with mere size. While considerably above the height of the Venus, and probably exceeding her in weight too—if we could possibly picture anything so unromantic as Venus in a pair of scales—yet so exquisitely was her frame moulded that the idea of bulk was never uppermost. Her face was chiselled like an antique Grecian sculpture, and her long white fingers, with their filbert nails, might have served as models for an artist. Her eye was

dark and lustrous, while the lids drooped over the orbs just enough to give a slightly voluptuous expression to the face; but this was toned by an exceedingly refined mouth. Her hair was black and glossy. It was classically arranged, innocent of the abominations of padding, and did not vary in its adornment with the fluctuations of fashion. When Squire Atkins saw her gaze riveted on Claude that Sunday evening (for even he came twice to church) he felt very much inclined to anticipate what was their future legislation, and get two other aggrieved parishioners to join him in a remonstrance to the Bishop of Glastonbury, so as to have Claude Vallance moved on like an itinerant tub-thumper to some other parish. Knowing they cannot punish clergymen corporeally—and Claude was not of a build to provoke this mode of castigation—laymen are apt to think they can use all sorts of obsolete ecclesiastical machinery against them when they find them in anyway obnoxious. But the Bishops soon undeceive

these would-be inquisitors. *Quieta non movere* is the ideal of episcopal existence; and they are not going to break through this for an aggrieved parishioner or two, unless obliged.

Clara waited for a moment under the churchyard elms to let her father and Claude precede her to Pomona House. She rather liked them to be together, for some reason she scarcely realized to herself. Besides, she was waiting for her cavalier, Oliver Jones, who had been again present, contrary to his usual custom, at evening service, looking askance, like a small and exceedingly ill-favoured Mephistopheles, while Claude was preaching.

"And what did Mr. Jones think of the sermon—or sermons?" asked Clara, re-echoing the question that was going all around the little churchyard, and seeming to speak aloud, so that all the bystanders might hear the nature of her communication.

"Heretical—but not actionable as yet, I

fancy," answered the little limb of the law, groping about with his claws of hands as if to feel in his missing bag for some authority on the subject. "How was it Miss Parkinson was not present at either service?"

He looked so significantly that Clara said, "You haven't done anything, have you? But there, I need not ask. You haven't had time."

"Oh, there's been time, for the matter of that. But I haven't got your instructions. I mean, we haven't made any agreement."

"How business-like you are."

"Yes, business *is* business."

"But this is love. Isn't your heart involved in this admiration for Miss Parkinson?"

"Oh yes, of course;" and the creature tried to look as though he had had a heart once and had lost it. Clara felt more than ever convinced of the missing estates belonging to the Parkinson family.

"I mean," he continued, "if I blow upon this business, and Ada gets sent off to the

Antipodes, that won't quite further my ends, will it?"

"Not exactly, perhaps; but they are not likely to move her; at all events not farther than London."

"But in any case, will you promise to do all you can for me? If you get——"

"There, you needn't go on. I know what you are going to say. You do what I tell you; I'll do what you tell me."

"Will you, though? That's exactly what I was going to propose. You've got a legal way of seeing and putting things, too."

"It's just as well to be explicit."

"So I think. You won't mind writing it down? No, I thought you wouldn't. I'll draw up our little agreement in duplicate to-night, and will each sign it. I shall go to my room at once. Mr. Vallance will keep you up late, I know. Good night."

They parted at the entrance to Pomona House; and Jones was quite right—the Curate did keep the brewer up until the

small hours on Monday morning. Clara sat out several cigars after the rest of the female members were smoked to bed. When he at length left the hospitable brewer, he found the young widow sitting in the moonlight outside the porch, and she took up the conversation where her father left it. As Claude passed into the open air Mr. Villars said—

“Then, good night, Mr. Vallance. I can only say for the twentieth time it does puzzle me more and more how you, with your ideas, ever came to be a parson. Clara, girl, are you going to spend the night in the garden? It’s more fit for Ethel or Emily than a matron of your years to be stargazing.”

“It’s so delicious; it seems a sin to go to bed, doesn’t it, Mr. Vallance?” And the fair white hand she had laid in his seemed to linger for a moment, as if it said, “Detain me if you please.”

Claude did detain it quite an unnecessarily long time, as far as any mere pur-

pose of saying good night was concerned; and even when he let it go, he exhibited no symptom of moving himself. Clearly Claude thought it a sin to go to bed too.

"Do you know, I have often debated the same question as papa," said Mrs. Thornton. "Will you think me rude if I say I cannot imagine why you ever took orders?"

"Not at all. I am flattered by your evidencing so much interest in me as to care whether I am a clergyman or a drayman. But, if you knew me better than you do yet"—and he seemed to emphasize the *yet*—"I would ask what other profession would suit me? The law is more in Mr. Jones's line than mine."

"Horrible," said Clara, interjectionally.

"Horrible, I agree with you. I would rather have been the drayman I just alluded to. Medicine, as far as the scientific part of it went, might have suited me, I think; but the details——"

"Horrible again," replied Clara, with evident recollection of her late husband's

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experiences. "Think of the night-bell at such a moment as this!"

Claude agreed it would be a disagreeable contingency if it broke off so agreeable a tête-à-tête.

"But literature, pure and simple. Why would not that suffice? That surely is a glorious profession in itself."

"Glorious, yes; but scarcely in itself. The temptation even now is very strong to do too much and too quickly. In writing to order this is inevitable. No, my experience tells me that literature is a splendid resource as an addition to other pursuits; but except for a man at the very top of the tree it ought not to form the sole pursuit. The bar or the Church alone remained, and I preferred the Gospel to the law."

"But how about a 'vocation,' as the goody people say?"

"I feel the very strongest. I believe that the principles of the English Church, apart from extremes in their interpretation,

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are the very truest embodiment of Christ's own teachings. If I felt strongly on the Sacraments, I would go to Rome. The mere disciplinary arrangement of the Pope's supremacy would be as nothing compared with the recognition of the Real Presence. If Bishops were an unmitigated stumbling-block, I would join the Free Churches. But I think no more of Bishops than of the Pope."

"John Glastonbury would like to hear that sentiment," observed Mrs. Thornton, with a smile, which made her face look charming in the moonlight.

"I believe—I may be wrong—but I believe there is good honest manly work to be done in the Church of England, only it wants men to do it, not——"

"Not Cyprian Guleses."

"You anticipate my meaning, though I would not have named names. I am no bigot; but I do feel, much as I admire the externals of Ritualism, that Gules and his party are out of date and out of place in

the Church of England. We cannot ignore the Protestant Reformation. But I am boring you with this conversation."

"Not in the least. Believe me, I am vastly interested in it, and really half feared you would resent as an impertinence the question with which I introduced it."

"No; I am continually putting the same question to myself. I ask myself, especially (since we are alone) when I look at Gules, What have I in common with these people? I am forced to confess, nothing. Then why do I not make a holocaust of my white ties and sermons, and live by my pen? I know I could make more money and rest like a Christian on the Sunday; and yet some fascination, which is nothing at all like *esprit de corps*, keeps me to Church work. I frankly own, however, that a very little persuasion would make me lapse into a layman."

If, as we believe will be the case in the next sphere of existence, there were no need of articulate speech to convey thoughts, but

the thought itself were the word, Claude would have known then what Clara was burning to convey to him, that she wished he would give up the work she still felt to be uncongenial, and take her along with his more fitting occupation. She had an ambition to be an author's wife. Without the slightest power of writing herself, perhaps because she had no such power, she almost overrated the glories of intellectual work. And there is such a method of communication, though it be faint and often imperceptible here. Claude knew what she was feeling, and yet, even on his part, was scarcely conscious that he did know it. It was impossible for him not to be flattered by the interest which the handsome woman at his side felt on his account; and again the occult sympathy passed back from him and reacted on her. She had admired Claude from the first moment she saw him: now she loved him with all the strength of her unusually strong nature. She felt the master passion for the first time in her life.

Her affection for the deceased apothecary had been of quite another order. Then there came the chilling sensation that Claude was another's; that Ada Parkinson had stolen a march on her. But she would not believe in the power of her rival. She would match herself against that slip of a girl at any rate. Jones was quite good enough for Ada; and she glanced up at the secretary's window, where the midnight lamp showed he was drawing up the necessary documents; and she mentally signed, sealed, and delivered them as Claude bade her a hasty good night; when Mrs. Villars put her matronly head out of the window, and told Clara not to forget to lock up when she came to bed, "if ever she meant to come."

As Claude footed it home to the Mitre, he certainly did calculate what the result would have been had he fallen in love with one of the brewer's daughters instead of the penniless Captain's little girl. Not only would there have been no objection at

Pomona House, but George Villars would certainly have bought him a living, and he might have gone to his grave in the odour of sanctity among the Clodshire clergy. For this fate, however, he had no ambition, whatever he might have thought of the matrimonial arrangement; and he frankly confessed that to have bestowed his hand on Mrs. Thornton would have involved nothing in the shape of self-sacrifice. However, the die was cast, and he never for one moment repented of the choice he had made. He pictured the tiny face pillowed amid the moonbeams in the little cottage at Combe Dean, and his last waking thoughts were how he should have liked Ada to be at Sturminster to hear his two sermons.

Meantime, while Claude Vallance went to and fro between Sturminster and his hamlet parish, or spent his time over his books and writings at the Mitre, Sturminster took sides. Some people, especially the very poor and the very rich, from Dick and Hodge to Pomona House and Brabazon Lodge, went

to hear him at Combe Dean, and it became quite difficult to accommodate the visitors on a Sunday in the little church; for Claude's fame spread into other parishes too, and a lot of people came every Sunday to hear the London "pa'son," as he got to be termed. But the Dorcas Society, headed by Gules, declared against him. This carried discussion even into George Villars's family, for, of course, Ethel sided with her beloved Cyprian; and as for Squire Atkins, he, too, grew theological all of a sudden. Like many ignorant people, Atkins mistook mere beefiness for pure Protestantism. He was not a bad fellow at bottom, but was so desperately in love with Clara Thornton that he could not see a good point in Claude Vallance, whom he suspected of being his rival. He stumped Sturminster during the week after the obnoxious sermons had been preached at the parish church; and began by asking the tradespeople whether they were going to stand that. At first they did not quite know what "that" meant; but

when they were made aware that it referred to Claude's imputed heresy, if they had been honest people they would have said that they rather liked it. Shire Hall, however, bachelor though its proprietor was, was a power in Sturminster. There was no knowing but Squire Atkins might marry and have a long family. Besides, he put it prominently forward that in this matter he was defending the old régime; so that he brought to his cause all the prestige of the rectory.

"You know I don't like to see our good old Rector's nose put out with this new-fangled nonsense. He has served us well these many years; and if this London fellow gives us much more of his newspaper and magazine twaddle, we shall have the tagrag and bobtail running after him, and perhaps a Dissenting chapel opened before we know where we are."

Brown, Jones, or Robinson, as the case might be, assented outwardly to the propositions laid down by the magnate of Shire

Hall ; but the assent was Jesuitical. They liked the new parson. They were proud that Sturminster wrote leading articles in newspapers, or signed papers in magazines. Nothing they enjoyed so much as to smoke a pipe at the Mitre bar on the mere chance of Claude dropping in for a moment before he went to his rooms, and giving them "the latest" from London. This greed for the latest intelligence is the ruling passion for the moment. The ancient Athenians themselves were not more eager than the modern Englishman to hear or tell some new thing.

"You see, sir," said politic Brown, Jones, or Robinson, "we, as tradesmen, can't move in this matter. Business people mustn't indulge in the luxury of private opinions. We of course respect the Rector, and whichever way Shire Hall and Brabazon Lodge turned we should turn too, whether we liked it or not."

"Brabazon Lodge is a regular Radical den," replied Mr. Atkins ; "and I hear the fellow is in there too. Of course he is."

Foiled in his endeavours to get up anything like a Cave of Adullam, Mr. Atkins took a higher flight. He called on Gules, who lodged at a pious milliner's shop, and sounded him on the subject of his brother Curate.

Now Gules was horrified at Claude's heterodoxy. Not only were his theological opinions the very antipodes of Claude's eclectic creed—and Gules honestly believed that the Anglo-Catholic school of theology had ultimated truth—but his was a feminine mind, and he really thought it wrong for a clergyman, or a "priest," as he phrased it, to engage in any mundane kind of work whatever. Never very strongly inclined towards art, Gules, on taking orders, put from him novels, plays, and everything of that kind. Even newspapers and magazines he rarely read, save and except those which bore on ecclesiastical topics. This concentration of aim was logical enough, and in a Church of more rigid constitution than the Establishment, might even have

been necessary. It has been said that Gules was a thorough parish priest, and his colleague respected him for his devotion. Nobody, however, had been harder on Cyprian Gules for his little eccentricities of doctrine and practice than the bucolic Squire of Shire Hall; so it was little more than cold comfort Mr. Atkins got when he was shown up to the milliner's first-floor front, where Cyprian was distilling Alban Butler's "Lives of the Saints" into a sermon for his next black-letter day festival. It took Mr. Atkins some time, and a good deal of beating about the bush, before he could impart his ideas and plans to the Curate. In fact, the latter were pretty crude, but as far as they were digested at all, they ran in the direction of stirring up the Bishop of Glastonbury to dislodge the obnoxious parson, who seemed supplanting him in Clara Thornton's regards. He did not say this even to himself, but that was his motive-power of action.

"Mr. Atkins," said Gules, in the most

provokingly polite manner, "I need scarcely say I should be happy to do anything to satisfy conscientious religious scruples, even though I did not share them. It would ill become me to utter one word to you in depreciation of my brother Curate, though I may say to you—as I do to him—that his religious opinions differ as widely from my own as—in fact, as yours do."

This was a clever coup; and Gules, who was clad in his serge cassock, sat playing with the little crucifix that hung from his watch-chain, while he paused for a moment to note its effect.

"You're higher than I like, Mr. Gules," was Atkins's reply, "but I know you to be sincere."

"Though you did once speak of me as a Jesuit in disguise."

"People gossip in Sturminster; but I own I did—perhaps do—think you a bit 'high,' but I don't believe you would do in Mr. Denton's absence what you wouldn't do before his face: and I'm sure Mr. Vallance

wouldn't have preached either of his last Sunday's sermons if the Rector had been there to hear him."

"Then pardon me," replied Gules, "if I say you do not know Mr. Vallance as well as I do, though he is no very intimate acquaintance of mine. He has no need any more than he has the inclination to be dishonest. I would not say one word to you that I should fear to have repeated to Mr. Vallance—Jesuit though you may deem me—but, deeply as I deplore the Broad Church movement, I am sure its adherents believe it to be only a legitimate development of that lamentable schism of the sixteenth century miscalled the Reformation."

"Oh, if that's your idea," said Atkins, rising, "of course it's no use for me to talk to you. You're playing into each other's hands I see——"

"Arcades ambo!" interpolated Gules, smiling and rising too.

"I don't know what that means; but I know that what with your High Church

and your Broad Church you're setting this parish together by the ears. You've turned the women's heads, and now he's come to turn the men's."

Without noticing his offensive manner, but irritating him in the extreme by his own bland and quiet scorn, Gules rejoined—

"There is one comfort, we shall neither of us turn your head, Mr. Atkins, and your household numbers no ladies for me to tamper with."

"No, it don't, sir" (Atkins always talked bad grammar when he got angry, and perhaps the allusion to his bachelor condition was a meditated stab). "No, it don't—at present—and when it do, let the priest, High or Broad, that sets foot there look out, that's all. I shall go to the Rector, and if I can't turn his head, I'll post off at once to the Bishop of Glastonbury."

"Exactly what I should have suggested, Mr. Atkins, in the first instance, if you had done me the honour to consult me. You will see, I am sure, that it would be out of

place for one Curate to pronounce an opinion on another."

Atkins, however, was too angry not to fire a raking shot as he went. "You talk of your schism of the sixteenth century, do you? Why, you look like a monk yourself with that petticoat on; and you know what broke up monkery then, don't you? I tell you the same thing is going on with you parsons now. You do your flirtations in private and by wholesale with an entire Dorcas Society at once; but this Broad Church gentleman is more particular in his attentions, and my game-keepers can tell stories of stolen meetings between him and a young lady in Combe Dean woods that will look very well for your cloth when I have got my case ready. What would be the result of their publication in the local paper, do you think?"

"I should think an action for libel from the young lady's friends. But don't let's quarrel either about Dorcas Societies or

doctrines. Least of all, don't let's slander young ladies. Good morning."

So the theological Squire bounced off to the rectory, where he found a useful ally in Mrs. Denton, who had been plying her husband with tracts, and quoted every bit of gossip she could pick up against the Curate. But Mr. Denton was just then engaged in studying the merits of superphosphate as a manure for his glebe fields, and was equally inaccessible to the arguments of the Squire and the tracts of his wife. He was as provokingly good-tempered as Gules was polite, and cut the matter short by saying—

"I'm going to luncheon, and if you like to come with me and taste as good a glass of sherry as ever came into Clodshire, I shall be very glad to see one or both of you. If you want to discuss theology or curates, stop here and do it. You, Atkins, know just as much of theology as you do of cuneiform characters; and as for my wife, she would quarrel with any curate that did not bear the brand of the Protestant Alli-

ance. I like both these young fellows at present, and find the one a capital set-off against the other. When I want advice I'll come to one of you two, of course. Now, Atkins, take my wife into luncheon, and bother curates."

That was all he got at the rectory. So he made up his mind; he would forget curates for the time being, and write to the Bishop when he got home.

At the meeting of the Dorcas Society, Gules was more in his element than in the society of a horsey Squire, and there he spoke so sympathetically that Mrs. Denton could have loved him had it not been for the cross on his watch-chain. Ethel Villars did love him, and loved him all the more for that appendage. Gules's vulnerable point was vanity fed by the softer sex; and he suspended the reading of one of Miss Sewell's novels, with which he was beguiling the time whilst the ladies worked, to deliver himself in the following terms—

"It is exceedingly difficult for me to

speaking on a matter about which Miss Villars reminds me I must speak; and I need scarcely say I only do so in the most informal manner—quite as a matter of ordinary conversation. You have most of you, ladies, consulted me as to the remarkable doctrines broached, and, still more, the irregular practices adopted by one whom I must still call my friend, the Reverend Claude Vallance. I need scarcely repeat to you collectively what I have already said individually, that I entirely differ from one and the other.”

“We were sure you would,” said the six Misses Evans at once.

“Couldn’t say much less,” snapped out Miss Tart.

“I am going to say more, Miss Tart, if you will give me time. I tell you in confidence that I have consulted the Rector on this matter, who simply acts the part of Gallo——”

“What’s that?” inquired Miss Tart.

“He cares for none of these things; though

you will recollect how strong his feeling was when I simply proposed to change the name of this body from the Dorcas Society to that of the Guild of S. Tabitha, Virgin and Confessor. He laughed at me; said Mr. Vallance was a sort of corrective to my Anglo-Catholicism, and ended by asking us both to dinner. He said we were like the tartaric acid and the alkali in an effervescing draught, and he liked to hear us fizz when we came together. What resource is there in such a case?"

"Only resignation," said Miss Souchong, meaning that the Curate and the Dorcas Society should be resigned to their fate. "We may have much worse to bear than a Broad Church Curate."

"Exactly my idea of the solution of the problem, my dear Miss Souchong, though I own"—and here Gules's voice trembled with emotion—"I did not quite expect to hear that remedy suggested by a member of our guild, as I shall venture to call it. Yes, ladies, Miss Souchong is right. She has

forestalled the announcement I was going to make to you. I shall resign the curacy of Sturminster."

It was mean of Gules. He knew poor Sarah Souchong did not intend this; but the word was a dubious one, and enabled Gules to assume the honours of incipient martyrdom. It was not the first or the fiftieth time he had announced his intention of resigning his curacy, and nobody, for one moment, thought he had any intention of carrying out his threat: but it suited their purposes to pretend they did. Ethel Villars immediately succumbed, and sobbed aloud in her pocket-handkerchief. The six Misses Evans sniffed sympathetically, and even mamma almost caught the contagion. The Dorcas Society became a band of mourners, and all scowled on poor good-natured Miss Souchong, who in vain protested that she had no such meaning in the word she used. Miss Tart was the only one unmoved amid the general affliction. Curates might come, and curates might go, her tongue would

flow on for ever. She gloried in the havoc her friend had wrought, and whispered to her, as she folded up her work—

“A pretty kettle of fish you’ve made of it. Let’s go and have a cup of tea.”

Gules was mollified with difficulty, and promised to reconsider his resignation. He was going to the Bishop of Glastonbury’s Garden Party, and might have an opportunity of asking his lordship’s advice—quite informally, of course. He wouldn’t for the world injure his clerical brother.

“Will Mr. Vallance be at the Garden Party too?” asked pretty Ethel Villars, almost in consternation, dreading, it may be assumed, lest the herculean Curate should resent his “brother’s” fraternal interference, and do him a bodily injury.

“He will not. When I asked him, he said he could not contemplate with equanimity the spectacle of the clergy of the diocese ‘pitching into’—that I regret to say was his expression—‘pitching into’ episcopal strawberries and cream.”

"How very profane!" simpered the half dozen.

"I do not altogether approve of the Bishop of Glastonbury, or the episcopal bench in general," said Cyprian Gules, "but I do not like to hear a father of the Church spoken of in that way."

"If you should have the opportunity of a private word with the Bishop, Mr. Gules, don't forget that Combe Dean girl——"

"I beg your pardon, forget whom, Miss Tart?"

"That little Ada Parkinson."

"Allow me to remind you, Miss Tart, that it is not usual to allude to a young lady as 'that girl,' and also that I object to scandal in any shape."

The Dorcas Society—were they not women?—subscribed to this heroic conduct of Gules with a suppressed murmur of applause: but in their secret souls they would have liked Tabitha to expatiate. Miss Tart read their meaning; and, though shut up for the moment by Gules, said—

"Ah, well, it's natural for you to stand by your cloth as far as you can; but I know it will come out over the strawberries and cream. Decent people can't pass Combe Dean woods without being scandalized at their love-making; and there's that benighted old fool the father shuts his eyes to it. It isn't right; and I know you'll mention it to the Bishop if you have a chance, Mr. Gules."

The Italian peasant whose hut is on the slopes of Vesuvius leads as reckless a life as the Cockney artisan who inhabits the safer, if less romantic, regions of Bagnigge Wells. He has heard of volcanic eruptions, but one has never crossed the line of his own individual experiences, and he is as incredulous as Hume himself on the subject of miracles. So too, whilst all these plots were being hatched against him, Claude Vallance went on the even tenor of his way, leading the charmed life of new love, and spending every moment when his beloved could not be with him in the double duties of his

clerical and literary profession. The necessity for disguise was a great trial to him. He felt that the manly course would be to tell Captain Parkinson the state of his affections, even if he did not confess the secret engagement, and then let matters take their course. If the Captain persistently refused his sanction—as he felt sure would be the case—Ada had arrived at years of discretion and could take the law into her own hands. Once or twice the ominous word “bolt” had been on his lips as a last resource if all else failed; but he weakly yielded to Ada’s request and waited—for what neither she nor he could say. He was living, as we have said, a charmed life, and he could not put forth his hand voluntarily to dispel a vision that was so sweet. On the very day and at the very hour when the Dorcas Society was discussing him in company with his brother Curate, and when Atkins had gone home to write his letter to the Bishop, Ada and he were in the old haunt among the Combe Dean woods. Claude

was stretched on his back reading Bailey's "Festus" aloud to her, while she listened and let her bit of fancy work lie idly by without even a pretence of doing anything more than hang upon the accents that had become so dear to her. After a while Claude put down the book and said, "Do you know, darling. I suppose it is only fancy, but I *do* fancy that your papa is less genial with me than formerly. Has he heard, think you?"

Ada had noticed the change too, though it was of the faintest; but she would not realize it, and put off Claude with an assurance which she did not quite feel that it was *only* fancy.

"Possibly. It's a horrible thing to say, but sometimes I feel as though I should almost like what a Yankee would call a *bust ap*."

"Claude!"

"I think at such times that if anything in the way of an earthquake or a volcanic eruption occurred, things might get ar-

ranged differently. Why should there be any difficulty in our case? I can well afford to keep a wife. All the impediment turns upon your papa's maxim that you must marry money. Why not bolt? Get it over, and come back repentant to Combe Dean. I'll go round to all my London publishers during the honeymoon, collect my outstanding debts, and draw a little on the future, return with a hatful of coin, pour it all at the paternal feet, and say, 'Papa, your blessing; Ada has married money.'"

But she could not bear to think of it. She knew better than Claude how deep-seated her papa's prejudices were—how necessary it was, according to his way of thinking, she should marry money. She would not look one hour beyond the happy present. By common consent they reverted to their original idea of deferring all horrors to the late autumn-tide at the earliest, and to go on reading "*Festus*" now. But Claude soon broke off again—

"Your papa said something the other day about taking you up to town for the fag-end of the London season, when all the heiresses were disposed of and a pretty face might prove attractive—those were his words, you little frump, you. Fancy the imbecile old gentleman calling yours a pretty face!" Claude generally prefaced his far from infrequent salutes with some such ironical remarks. "Now, supposing he does carry out his idea, and you go from me to be involved in all sorts of temptations——"

"Do you suspect me?"

"*Ad mortem fidelis!* No, I don't. I know you to be far above all petty caprice; but—will you think me a dreadful idiot for what I am going to say?"

"Very probably. Still, say it."

"I should like, before you went, for us both to go and kneel before that little altar in Combe Dean church and say the marriage service."

"Marry yourself?"

"Yes, marry myself; and if there were two witnesses present, it strikes me it would be very difficult to prove it was not a legal marriage. I don't want that; but for our own satisfaction I should like it. Do you believe marriage to be a sacrament, Ada?"

"Since you ask me—yes, I do."

"And you would consider such a ceremony binding?"

"I need no 'ceremony,' Claude, to bind me to you."

"But, supposing we had gone through such a ceremony, and I went the next day up to London, or was going up to London and got cut up into a number of minute pieces on the railway——"

"Don't, please!"

"No, I won't, if I can help it. But would you, in that case, consider you were married to me?"

"Most certainly I should."

"And would never marry any one else?"

"No. I told you I considered marriage a sacrament. Bodily death could not touch

it. I should still be yours. Why are you asking me this?"

"Supposing *you* had to go away, and I told you all my happiness depended on your going through such a ceremony, would you do it?"

"I would do anything that secured your happiness. Certainly I would do that. I should only feel the ceremony was unnecessary as far as my love went, though sacramental as binding me to you. But I would not refuse you."

"I told you the other day that I was awfully superstitious—I mean, in the way of forecasting the future. I don't know why, but I have to-day a vague presentiment that something is going to happen."

"A bust up, as you term it?"

"Yes; though I have no notion of what kind. Ada," he exclaimed, starting to his feet, "will you come with me now to Combe Dean church and read through the marriage service before the altar?"

"You frighten me very much with your

presentiment; but, as I told you, I will do anything which may secure your happiness. Yes, I will come." And she rose too.

They went through the summer woods to the little hamlet church that was bosomed in their very midst. It was one of the tiniest churches in all England, as well as the most perfect in its architectural details. There they knelt before the altar rail and read the solemn words of betrothal—

"I, Claude, take thee, Ada, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance, and thereto I plight thee my troth."

"I, Ada, take thee, Claude, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance, and thereto I give thee my troth."

Then, as if to prove that this was no

mere freak, and certainly showing that the act was premeditated, Claude took from his little finger a signet ring, which Ada had not noticed, though he was not in the habit of wearing one. Putting it on the wedding-ring finger of Ada's hand, he said solemnly—

*"With this ring I thee wed, with my body
I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods
I thee endow, in the name of the Father, and
of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."*

Then they passed out of the little church by the vestry door as they had entered it, Claude pausing to lock it with his private key, and never noticing a diminutive figure coiled behind a buttress, and looking in its pepper-and-salt suit like a portion of the wall itself. Oliver Jones had been flattening his nose against the window-pane during the entire proceeding, and his colossal steed was tied to the north side of the church paling when Claude and Ada left it by the south. Consequently he was not detected, and only said, as he prepared to remount—

"That's a pretty go. However, even if a man can marry himself, this ain't legal, for its after twelve o'clock, and—there was only one witness. I'd have given something if he'd registered it. I should have had him then."

Not until they had separated, did Ada look at the ring on her finger; and then she saw inscribed upon the bloodstone their own motto—

"AD MORTEM FIDELIS."





CHAPTER VI.

THE BISHOP OF GLASTONBURY.

IT seems perhaps like weakly betraying the locality of scenes we have hithertodesignedly left in cloudland, when it is mentioned that Sturminster is in the diocese of Glastonbury, as well as the less recognizable county of Clodshire; but when it is recollected that Glastonbury is not now an episcopal see, it will be perceived that *the topography is rather typical than purely descriptive*. Any one who is acquainted with that serene spot where Dunstan dwelt of yore, will not fail to acknowledge its special fitness for being the seat of one of those new episcopal centres which our age seems destined to multiply to any extent. Our Glastonbury is an ideal, and not the phenomenal one, however.

John, Lord Bishop of Glastonbury, was a hard-faced man, in whom his enemies and more satirical friends discerned a strong resemblance to the traditional features of Mr. Ralph Nickleby. He had risen to the bench by the ladder of scholastic experience, which, in the days whereof we write—and those not so distant, either—was the surest passage to the prelacy. Why the caning of naughty little boys should be considered a qualification for administering the affairs of a diocese, we leave those to decide who take a lower estimate than we do of the clerical character and the onerous duties of a Bishop. He had marked the annual rounds of this ladder by increasing the female population of the island to the extent of six or seven daughters, who, like the Misses Evans, were generally spoken and thought of throughout the diocese in their collective capacity. They were termed the Curates' Aid Society, from the fact that when one of the inferior clergy married a Miss Bishop his preferment to one of the richest livings in East

Clodshire was only a question of longevity on the part of the existing incumbent.

Glastonbury Palace was celebrated for its garden parties. They came cheap; and, if the weather proved favourable, enabled his lordship to dispense his episcopal hospitality without coming very closely into contact with the inferior clergy. It was a sort of secular visitation. The episcopal gardens grew strawberries in abundance, and the Glastonbury meadows made the episcopal cows exuberant in cream. Only the inner circle were privileged to share the exceptional honours of five o'clock tea with Mrs. Bishop and the Misses Bishop; and from the select assemblage came his lordship's examining chaplains, the Misses Bishops' husbands, and the "superior" clergy of the diocese of Glastonbury.

The uninitiated outsider who gazed on the episcopal palace with its antique walls, its moat and mimic drawbridge, were wont to think that, with an income of 5000*l.* a year, it must be a singularly eligible spot.

In such an atmosphere many fancied it would be, as Becky Sharp said, very easy to be good ; and, in point of fact, Dr. John Johnson appreciated the *otia tuta* into which his vessel had withdrawn from the storms of scholastic and inferior clerical existence. Light ripples sometimes disturbed the smoothness of the surface. The Dean for the time being might not be all that was wished. An Archdeacon, oblivious of "archidiaconal functions," once preached an incendiary sermon, and the Chapter did not drop down quite as heavily as the Bishop would have liked. Minor canons were sometimes as frisky as curates ; but these were trifles. The little Johnsons grew to be big Johnsons. They married and were given in marriage, and the oldest incumbents of the richest livings proved that they were not immortal. The lines had fallen to Dr. John Johnson in pleasant places, and he was not ungrateful. He remembered the time when he paced the streets of the county town in a threadbare coat as master

of the Grammar School, and rather resented the dispensations of fate which gave him no higher avocation than caning little boys. He recognised a compensation in things now he drove through the quiet Glastonbury streets in his luxurious carriage and caned curates—metaphorically of course—instead of schoolboys.

That morning's post had brought one or two missives calculated to disturb the serenity even of an episcopal palace. Having handed over the business documents to his chaplain and secretary, he retained one or two more private communications, in the contents of which the readers of this story are not altogether without interest.

In the first place came Squire Atkins's epistle, which, after considerable emendation, and difficulty as to how a real live Bishop should be addressed, he had composed and forwarded. This effusion dwelt first and principally on the heterodox nature of certain sermons which had been

preached at Sturminster, and were still being continued at Combe Dean by the Rev. Claude Vallance, M.A., Curate in charge of the latter parish and fellow of S. Boniface. There were also hints and innuendos that the conduct of this reverend gentleman in reference to a certain lady parishioner was such as might be expected from one so lax in point of doctrine.

A second letter was from none other than Captain Parkinson himself, enclosing an anonymous communication he had received as to the conduct of the Rev. Claude Vallance in reference to his daughter, and requesting leave to call upon his lordship, as he was most anxious, for the sake of the clerical order as well as on his own account, to avoid a fiasco. A third letter was from one Mr. Oliver Jones to the effect that he had a private communication to make to his lordship as to one of the clergy of his diocese, and that he should prefer doing so by word of mouth rather than by writing. This letter was dated from Sturminster too.

From these documents it will be perceived that the game had been kept up briskly at Sturminster. The little place might be stagnant as a rule, but when it did move it went the pace. As usual, the ladies were at the bottom of it all. Whatever were the avowed objects of Squire Atkins and Mr. Oliver Jones; pure as might be the Protestant principles of the one, disinterested as the other might pretend his friendship for the beautiful widow to be, it was the fact that two ladies were in love with Claude Vallance, which involved him in his present difficulty at Glastonbury palace. Had he been a bald-headed man with blue spectacles he might have preached Renan pure and simple without Squire Atkins interfering, or Oliver Jones being alarmed for his bijou love. The Bishop sent for his confidential chaplain, Mr. Twister, and said—

“They seem to be rather in hot water at Sturminster. Who is this Mr. Vallance? Is he licensed?”

“Just licensed, my lord. He is a literary clergyman. I had hoped great things of

him. He has simply offended the Sturminster folk with his Broad Church doctrines." Twister prided himself upon being mildly latitudinarian for a bishop's chaplain and possibly prospective son-in-law.

"That doesn't seem the worst, though. How about the lady?"

"That's only the way the Sturminster folks have of doing things. There's nothing in it all, I expect, except a few cantankerous old maids."

"Still it's easier to deal with a scandal like that than with a matter of doctrine. Make an appointment with these people for Thursday."

"Shall I request Mr. Vallance to attend?"

"No."

"Gules, the other curate, will be here to-day. Your lordship could sound him."

"I will."

The right reverend father in God did sound Cyprian Gules, and got from him the most ample confirmation of the unsound

doctrine. When he brought the lady upon the tapis Gules was anxious to collapse, but his lordship would not have that; and eventually Gules had to make a clean breast of it. There had been some scandal against Vallance in Sturminster, first on account of his literary avocations—especially in the dramatic line—and his living at an hotel, and then on account of his being perpetually seen in the Combe Dean woods with the daughter of one of his parishioners.

“Captain Parkinson, is it not?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Have the goodness to come over here on Thursday at twelve, Mr. Gules, when I have cited Mr. Atkins, Captain Parkinson, and Mr. Oliver Jones——”

“Mr. Oliver Jones! Has your lordship had a communication from him?”

“Yes. Thursday, at twelve, please. Good afternoon, Mr. Gules.”

Here was an eruption brewing and no mistake; yet still Claude and Ada preserved their Bagnigge Wells attitude on the slopes

of Vesuvius. Once warned by the anonymous missive, of course Captain Parkinson had no difficulty in certifying the suspicions thus aroused. Then he only wondered at his previous blindness, and his first impulse was, as we have seen, to forward the letter to the Bishop. He had his interview on the Thursday morning, and was not a little surprised to find that he was only one of a trio of complainants. Had he known that Mr. Atkins and especially that Oliver Jones were moving in the matter, he certainly would never have submitted the case to the Bishop at all. However, he concealed his grievance at the discovery, and formed his own plans in secret. Gules's evidence was not used except to corroborate the testimony of the others. When the Bishop had pumped everything he wanted out of each of his informants, and had Mr. Twister by to make notes, he said in his most frigid manner—

“I thank you, gentlemen, for this information; and, depend upon it, I shall lose

no time in communicating with Mr. Vallance."

"My daughter's name will be treated with delicacy I hope, my lord," said Captain Parkinson.

"And Mr. Vallance, I venture to trust, will not be allowed to remain at Combe Dean," urged Squire Atkins.

"My communication will be regarded as confidential, of course," said Jones.

"And my name will not appear," suggested Cyprian Gules.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, your communications were spontaneously made, and no conditions imposed. I need no instructions in my duties. I shall confer with Mr. Twister, and take such steps as I think proper. Show these gentlemen out," he added to the footman who answered his bell.

It will be noticed that, during all this time no word had been said as to what Oliver Jones saw in the church. He had mentioned it to no one; perhaps holding it

as a trump-card to be played when the occasion arose.

"Write to this Mr. Vallance, Twister," said the Bishop. "Say nothing about the Broad Church doctrine; that may get us into the Ecclesiastical Courts and cost money. Put the lady well to the front, which will, no doubt, simplify matters. Tell him that, in consequence of reports which have reached me, I must revoke his licence, and at the same time specify to Mr. Denton what the reports are. He is a sensible fellow, and will no doubt persuade this young man to leave the diocese quietly. We should be involved in endless troubles if once Broad Church principles got a footing here."

And Mr. Twister wrote accordingly.

Never had the sun sunk so grandly during all those blissful eventides as it did above the Combe Dean woods on one memorable evening. Claude and Ada remained out later than usual; they were getting rash through continued immunity,

and seemed to think they were invisible, so little did they know of the way the gossips' tongues were wagging. There had been no more talk of going to London. Captain Parkinson, whether designedly or not, appeared even more blind than usual of late ; but still Claude had made up his mind to act on his own responsibility and see him the very next day. He would say no word to Ada, but speak openly to Captain Parkinson first, and then, if he refused, ask her to fulfil her vow with him. He felt, then, that this might be the last of their sweet stolen meetings, and pressed her to linger on and on, until the sun had quite sunk beneath the horizon, and the evening shadows fell around them.

"I can quite understand the adoration of the old fire-worshippers when I look upon that most majestic scene in all nature. I seem to be able to realize infinity when I see the sun sink in the sea. Even yonder half the great riddle seems solved."

"It is beautiful."

"I wonder whether Isaac Taylor was right in that exquisite hypothesis of his? He starts the idea, in his 'Physical Theory of Another Life,' that the sun of each planetary system is the heaven, or the first step towards heaven, for the inhabitants of that system. There are, he says, two kinds of life—the planetary, marked by alternations of light and darkness, of activity and repose; and the solar, not needing and therefore not subject to such changes. 'There shall be no night there.' There, in the photosphere, or world of light, the spiritual body shall learn the first lessons of its new ethereal nature."

"And will there, according to this idea, be progress? You spoke of the sun as possibly only the first step towards heaven, not heaven itself."

"Yes; we shall still be 'changed from glory into glory.' Astronomers can even now point us to what appears a small fixed star around which the whole of our solar system, and probably many other such

systems, revolve. No doubt there are other such centres—other and other—until imagination loses itself in guessing where may be the ultimate centre in which God is. The idea is very beautiful, still more so when pictured as *we* picture it, darling, the separated halves of the twin human soul reunited, as ours will be, and speeding their way together amongst these countless worlds of new delights.”

“You believe the other planets inhabited worlds like this, do you not?”

“Could we be conceited enough to deem this little speck all the universe? It would even seem that, besides being one of the smallest, our earth is one of the grossest of the orbs that have been thrown off in the course of ages from the central luminary. Instead of being more ethereal, then, in proportion to their nearness to the sun, probably those planets which are farther off are more sublimated; in which case Mercury and Venus alone are grosser than our world, and Jupiter, yon grand old fellow there which

looks almost like a young moon, is as much more refined in structure as it is larger in size than the earth. But a truce to astronomy. Let us linger one delicious half-hour longer in the dear old woods to-night ;" and they plunged into the very deepest recesses again.

It was blank darkness when Ada re-emerged, her hat hanging loosely over her neck, and her hair somewhat more tangled even than usual when she had newly escaped from Claude's embrace. Her cavalier was close at hand, but did not actually come out into the open until Ada had got home, and he saw the lamplight glimmer through the closed curtains of the dining-room. He took a long look at the little place lying there in the purple evening, and wondered what his experiences there would be to-morrow. Well might he marvel !

"Anyhow that dear girl is mine for time and eternity," he soliloquized, and sped home buoyantly as he always did when he had been with her.

The next morning he could not even await the arrival of the postman, but set out betimes, determining to do a morning's work among his poor people, and then try to catch Captain Parkinson alone. Ada had some expedition on hand, and there was no arrangement for a meeting between her and Claude, which was something quite exceptional in their recent experiences.

His courage did not fail him when the time drew near, though he knew he was going on a pretty well forlorn hope.

"Still," he reasoned, "it is better to have it decided. If I had not gone through that ceremony in church I should not have felt half so secure of Ada; but now, whatever be the issue of my interview with the Captain—— Hallo, Robson, what is going on here? Visitors coming to the Captain? Is he at home?"

A large cartful of boxes was going up the little avenue which led to the cottage, and the man who was driving the vehicle seemed startled at Claude's question.

"Didn't you know, sir? The Captain and Miss Parkinson was off as soon as it was light this morning, to catch the early train to London. The cottage is let furnished, and these is the people's boxes. I thought you would be sure to have known, sir."

"O what so soon? Some sudden change," Claude said, to throw the man off his guard. "I shall find a letter at home, no doubt. I left before the post came in."

"Ah, that accounts for it, sir. The Captain did seem in a hurry like, last night."

What could it mean? Remember, Claude was utterly in the dark as to all the plotting against him. He had suspected that the Captain knew more of late than he cared to confess. Now he was certain that he knew all, and had spirited Ada away from him. Now it struck him that it was simply miraculous this had not occurred before. In a little place like Combe Dean or Sturminster, where everybody knew everybody else's business, the marvel was that their

affaire had gone on for a week, not that it collapsed now. Now, too, he repented that he had not followed the promptings of his own heart, and spoken to the Captain before. However, it would all be cleared up now. He fairly flew home, and there on his table found a post letter and a note. Of course one would be from Captain Parkinson, and the other from Ada. He opened them with a trembling hand.

The post letter was from the Bishop's chaplain revoking his recent licence; the note which had come by hand was from Mr. Denton, begging him to come up to the rectory at once, as he had an important letter from the Bishop.

Here was revolution, and all within an hour. But he was equal to the emergency. What puzzled him was that there was no letter from Ada. Her father might choose to do the mysterious, but of her he was secure. He must wait for twenty-four hours, however, before he could get her letter now; and he would not let those

hours be wasted. The revocation of the licence by the Bishop was inexplicable. He had been maligned by somebody, that was clear from the terms of the chaplain's letter; but he had been condemned unheard, and could have protested had he felt inclined to do so. He simply sat down, enclosed his licence in an envelope, and addressed it to the Bishop "with the Rev. Claude Vallance's compliments," and then wrote the following note, which he sent by hand, to Mr. Villars—

"MY DEAR SIR,

"You have often asked me to take up my abode permanently or for a time at Pomona House, as you felt the surroundings at the Mitre to be uncongenial. Hitherto I have forborne to trespass on your hospitality. Will you think me very changeable if I write to say I now accept your offer with pleasure? I will come to your house on a visit to-night, as I want to talk to you on important business. I know the resources

of Pomona House to be such that I shall not overtax them by this sudden announcement.—Believe me, my dear Sir,

“Yours faithfully,

“CLAUDE VALLANCE.”

He then sped off to the rectory.

Claude might have exercised the prophetic power he claimed as to the sight which awaited him there. He knew the Rector would be arranged to receive him just as he had been at his first interview, and on every occasion when he had met him by appointment since. It was old Mr. Denton's favourite fallacy to imagine that he was a theologian. No child could be more innocent of the queen of sciences than he was; but it was his hobby to think the reverse. Consequently, on all grand occasions, he got himself up as though he were going to have his photograph taken, sitting in his arm-chair poring over a folio. When his visitor tapped at the door, he looked off from his volume with a surprised, almost a despairing

air, as though he resented the intrusion; and remained with one finger on the ponderous tome, seemingly ready to resume his study when the troublesome personage should have left.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Vallance! How do you do?" he said, with the greatest urbanity, meant to convey the idea that, if anybody else had broken off the current of his abstruser thoughts, he might have complained, but that so dear a bosom friend was an obvious exception.

Then followed a brief meteorological discussion as to the weather, which was much more natural, as his ideas ran rather on crops and manures than on patristic theology. Claude knew exactly the process that would have to be gone through, and waited patiently until the experiences of the past few days and the anticipations of the future were all exhausted. Then he would come to business. As the business was to be a disagreeable one, the dissertation was unusually protracted. Eventually, however, the old man came to the point.

"I have received a letter from the Bishop of Glastonbury, Mr. Vallance," said the Rector, as though that were a passing circumstance that had crossed his mind in the course of his more important literary and meteorological studies.

"And I from the Bishop's chaplain, sir."

"O indeed. I did not know his lordship was going to write——"

"Not his lordship, but Mr. Twister."

"It's all the same," rejoined the Rector, with evident signs of relief at being spared an announcement. "Then you know the Bishop's decision as to——"

"As to myself. I do, sir. He revokes my licence in a way he would not have dared to act with his butler."

"Yes. It's rather hasty. I think his lordship might have communicated with me first—but——"

"Being a Bishop of course he can do no wrong."

"Or if he does wrong, we must submit."

"Just as we must if a policeman takes us up on a false charge."

The Rector did not exactly like the tone of Claude's similes, though he could not question their relevancy.

"We submit," continued the Curate, "because we know the fellow"—this of course alluded to the policeman—"has law, if not equity, on his side, and we reserve the discussion of the case for a subsequent occasion. Let me relieve your mind as to any intended insubordination. Here is my licence, addressed to the Bishop with my compliments, which I will leave with you to have posted."

"Thank you, I'm sure," said old Denton, who had anticipated no such speedy or pacific solution of the difficulty.

"I have left the letter open in order that you may add any account of this interview you like. And now I should be glad if you could give me any explanation."

"Of course, Mr. Vallance, you are entitled to an explanation of the false doctrine laid to your charge. Your future welfare in the Church may depend upon it."

“ I find no false doctrine laid to my charge in this remarkable document”—and he tossed the chaplain’s laconic epistle to the Rector—“ but rather lax morality. It is of neither of these, however, that I seek an explanation. I can afford to treat them with the most utter unconcern. I want to ask whether you can explain the sudden absence of Captain Parkinson and his daughter, which I cannot help connecting in some way or other with this sledge-hammer mode of dispensing episcopal justice. No doubt Miss Parkinson is the lady alluded to.”

“ No doubt, if there is a lady in the case at all—and the French say there always is a lady in every difficulty—the French say——” he kept muttering on as he scanned the well-filled sheet the Bishop had addressed to him with his own hand.

“ O yes, here is some little reference I see to certain improprieties of conduct—yes, yes ; but the main bulk of the letter to me is about Broad Church doctrine.”

“ I see, sir, the Bishop and his chaplain

are not quite agreed ; but let us put them on one side. Can you tell me who are my friends in Sturminster that have got up this little business ?”

“It is only right you should know. I am told Mr. Atkins, of Shire Hall, has found your doctrines a stumbling-block——”

“My doctrines or my practice ? I could understand the latter ; but I really did not know the proprietor of Shire Hall was theological.”

“Mr. Atkins is a very sound Churchman, and—and an authority on manures. He was scandalized with the sermons you preached at Sturminster when we exchanged duties, and——”

“I see it all, sir,—trumped up the other story to strengthen his case. I don’t want to hear any more, and really have no excuse for troubling you further. By the way, though, I am curious to know what are the special tenets in Mr. Atkins’s theology to which my teaching did violence.”

“He says,” answered the Rector, again referring to the letter, “that you distinctly

enjoined Scepticism as a duty, and preached down the Day of Judgment."

"Thanks. I wanted to know——"

"Very naturally so, in order that you may be more cautious in your next cure. And when—" for Claude had risen to cut short the interview—"when do you leave Sturminster?" he asked, placing in Claude's hands a cheque for his stipend, with ready-stamped receipt.

"I haven't the least intention of leaving Sturminster. I have returned you my licence to forward to the Bishop. You have paid me my stipend, and here is the receipt signed. There our official connexion ends; but I need not say good-by, as in a small town like this we are sure to meet frequently. I am going to stay a little while at Pomona House. I believe I am to have the pleasure of meeting you at Brabazon Lodge at dinner next week; and, after a brief run to London, I shall probably return to my old quarters at the Mitre."

Here was a disruption of all Mr. Denton's happy dreams. He had thought to remove the difficulty at once by Claude's voluntary retirement and election to waive all explanation. But with his presence in Sturminster the eyesore would still remain. He begged him to sit down again, and confide to him his future plans. He should be so glad to recommend him to a curacy, as no doubt the Bishop would be to license him, in another part of the diocese. "That is, I know, his lordship's plan in cases where scandal occurs. He is quite ready to license a gentleman in any other neighbourhood."

"Exactly the line of policy I can imagine the Right Reverend John Johnson adopting. No, sir, I shall not ask the Bishop to renew my licence just yet. When I want your recommendation I will avail myself of your kind offer."

This was not by any means the kind of interview to which the Rector was accustomed in the case of curates. He expected

to hear explanations demanded and ruined prospects talked of. Decidedly Claude Vallance was a very exceptional member of the inferior clergy. The interview was continued only a little while longer, but in that time Claude heard quite enough to convince him that his brother curate and Captain Parkinson were in the plot too. Either Oliver Jones was not alluded to, or he did not think him worth notice.

From the rectory he passed, with a jaunty *au revoir* to his late incumbent, back to his rooms at the Mitre, to put together a few things for his visit to Pomona House, and also to muse over the situation a little. It had come upon him so suddenly that he had had no time to think of it; and now far above all other ends and aims there came upon him the one abiding purpose of finding out Ada and claiming the immediate fulfilment of her promise. The only difficulty he had was to wait until the morrow, when her letter would of course arrive. He dreaded lest she should have been subject to annoy-

ance on his account, as he could not but feel was too, probably the case. Solitude was the one thing he could not face, and at Pomona House he would have plenty of society at all events. Was there anything in the circumstance of Mrs. Clara Thornton being a member of the circle which influenced Claude's movements in that direction? Who can tell? so occult even to ourselves are the motives by which our actions are influenced.

The news about the revocation of the licence had been already conveyed to Pomona House, *via* Ethel Villars, who had, in her turn, been informed by Gules. He only knew, however, that Mr. Denton would be forced to dismiss Claude, and not what Claude's intended movements, or rather absence of movement might be. When Claude therefore entered the breakfast room, in lay attire, the whole group, by some species of freemasonry, understood one another. He knew they had been informed, and guessed how—for he was quite sure the

Rector had consulted Gules before speaking to him; and they all felt he was aware of their knowledge too. Ethel was the only one who looked a little bit shame-faced under the circumstances. George Villars and Clara Thornton took a hand each, and said most heartily—

“Mr. Vallance, we congratulate you.”

Claude was a proud man, and was glad to escape the mortification of having to confess that he had been drummed out of his curacy; so he was thankful that Gules had forestalled him. This, however, weighed less with him than the additional indignity of having to tell the assembled circle that the Parkinsons had left Dale House suddenly, without apprising him of their intention.

“There is a degree of mystery about the movements of those good folks,” said Mrs. Thornton, slightly changing colour, as she heard how Oliver’s plot was working, and knew the explanation was in her own pocket at that moment, in the shape of the

duplicate agreement. "Didn't you say, papa, there was some sort of secret as to their coming here?"

"Nobody exactly knew how, or why, or from whence they came, my dear. Somebody else bought the freehold of Dale House—which was not to be had for a mere song, let me tell you—and soon after the Parkinson family took possession; but it wasn't Captain Parkinson who bought the property."

"Mrs. Parkinson died after they came to the place, I think," said Claude, glad to have any excuse for talking, so as to dissemble his anxiety.

"Yes," replied George; "the poor old lady never seemed quite easy. There appeared to be some skeleton in the cupboard at Dale House."

"Where is there not?" said Mrs. Villars, who liked to take a romantic turn sometimes.

"Well," rejoined George Villars, "I suppose there may be a skeleton somewhere stowed away in one of the cupboards here; but

really I fancy Pomona House is as little troubled as any place in Sturminster."

Claude smilingly hoped he had not brought one with him; and Mrs. Thornton bethought her of the document in her pocket, and its counterpart in the possession of Oliver Jones. O yes; we all have our skeletons.

"No, Mr. Vallance," continued the brewer; "depend upon it, you've done the right thing in coming here, and throwing that confounded curacy in old John Glastonbury's face. Here are a couple of rooms for you, where you can write to your heart's content; and when you're tired of that, well there's plenty of society for you; and the longer you will stay with us the better we shall all of us be pleased. I can't say fairer, can I?"

"You remind me of the antique hospitality, Mr. Villars. But remember, though you are master here, you are not in sole authority. The ladies claim a share in these little arrangements; and I have often heard

them say that there is no nuisance so great in a house as a man lying about all day with nothing to do."

"Mr. Vallance is fond of fishing, mamma," said Clara Thornton. "Let us all rise to his bait. We, the ladies of Pomona House, respectfully request the pleasure of Mr. Claude Vallance's company until further notice."

"Until you drum me out, like the Rector. On condition that you will do that as soon as you are tired of me, I will pitch my tent here with pleasure. Indeed, as you see, I did so instinctively as soon as I felt myself a free man."

"Perhaps if you had done so before, Mr. Vallance, things would never have come to this pass," said Mrs. Thornton, looking languishingly at the ex-curate.

"Really, I don't think we need trouble ourselves on that score, Mrs. Thornton," was Claude's reply. "I am not generally an optimist; but in this case I verily believe things are better as they are."

"I'm sure of it," remarked George Villars.

Gules and Jones spent the evening at Pomona House, and felt very small indeed—smaller than usual, if possible—when they found Claude was actually ousted from his curacy, yet, so far from relieving them of his presence, that he had established himself at Pomona House.

"I shall come and sit under you Sunday after Sunday, Gules," he said; "and only let me catch you in a single heresy, won't I tell John Glastonbury?"

Gules winced; but Jones came to the rescue, and said, "Mr. Gules is a true son of the Church, Mr. Vallance," thinking that would do as well as anything else.

"So he may be, and still not suit John Glastonbury. His turn will come next. Bishops' swords, like those of the Cherubim, turn both ways, in the direction of High Church as well as Broad Church——"

"Or No Church," simpered Gules.

"Or No Church; that's about it, I believe," quietly responded Claude.

Throughout a greater part of this desultory conversation, Mrs. Thornton remained a charmed and patient listener. Her plans had succeeded to a miracle; and when Claude bade her goodnight, intending to go to his rooms after a smoke with Mr. Villars, and all the rest adjourned for a game at billiards, for which Miles Denton had been invited, Mrs. Thornton could not refrain from saying to her ugly little accomplice, "Mr. Jones, you have done wonders."

"I told you I wouldn't let the grass grow under my feet; yet you see she *has* gone—to the Antipodes or somewhere. But we shall soon find that out."

"I will do all I can; but what plan do you suggest?"

"I like that," chuckled Jones. "No; I've done my part. Now comes yours. Is it not so nominated in the bond?"

"It is; but——"

"But how are you to go to work? Naturally you don't know. I'll tell you. Only mind, you must do it. I only tell you how."

"I am ready. What is it?"

"Stop the postman to-morrow. Collar the letter that is sure to come from Ada to him. You read the contents—I'd rather not. Keep the envelope for me. If she's in London, I know every district mark. If not, the postmark will direct us, even supposing the full address isn't inside, as in all probability it will be, unless they've arranged this slope on their own account. It's on the cards, to judge from all I've seen."

"What have you seen?"

"A little more than I care to tell even you just yet. Goodnight. I'm going to think over things a bit. Be up early and, as they say at Christmas time, don't forget the postman."



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CHAPTER VII.

"LIKE A LOST BELOVED BIRD."

GLAUDE VALLANCE, as has before been hinted, had immense powers of recuperation ; and, in his present condition of uneasiness, felt the best thing he could do would be to turn in early and sleep away as much of the time as possible until the post brought him Ada's letter. It was an unromantic method to adopt ; and still less lover-like was it in him to sleep uncommonly well, instead of tossing in broken sleep or uneasy dreams, and rising unrefreshed. He was up betimes, though not exactly with the lark, and felt as though a load had gone from him. How strange is this relief in sleep, when the ills from which we suffer are rather anxiety of mind than

fatigue of body. Is it, as some deem, that, when the eyes close on the material world, the spirit still wakes and lives for the time being in a more congenial sphere, so coming back renewed to earth when the body rises rested in the golden morning?

He did not care to display any particular anxiety as to the arrival of the post, for some little badinage had gone on at his expense on the previous day, and Mrs. Thornton especially had opined that he would be particularly anxious to get his letters the next morning.

"You have told them to send the postman on here from the Mitre, of course," said Mrs. Thornton. "Will you allow me the supreme privilege of being your post-mistress during the time you honour us, and bringing your letters to you every morning?"

Claude would be only too flattered if Mrs. Thornton would do so. Of course no gleam of suspicion ever shot through his mind that his correspondence would be tampered with. Little Jones rubbed his hands, chuckled with

delight, and murmured to himself "Don't she do it beautifully?"

Clara was on the lawn, arrayed in that most bewitching of all costumes a thin muslin dress, and looking radiant in the sunshine, when Claude opened his window. The morning rays stealing in among jessamine and woodbine perfumed his cozy chamber, which opened from his bedroom. He had dressed leisurely, and taken his breakfast, as was to be his custom, in his own apartment. He was conscious of only one avocation now; and what one is so weary? He had but to wait. He could do nothing until he got tidings of Ada. His books were put from him, his pen lay idle. He could only sit and helplessly hope for news.

"Behold me at my post," said Clara, speaking to him from the lawn. "I am expecting the letter-carrier. Here he is," and she went to the garden gate, returning with her white hands quite full of letters.

Claude was breathless with anxiety, but

he dissembled by lighting his morning cigar, and appearing entirely absorbed in that operation.

"Shall I come down to relieve you, Mrs. Thornton?" he asked. "You seem literally to have your hands full."

"You said your morning hours were your most precious ones, and therefore you are on no account to emerge. I am only sorting the Pomona House epistles proper from yours. You seem to have the larger proportion. What a correspondence yours must be."

"I look upon the postman as my personal enemy. I always say so."

"Do you?" said Clara, dreamily, and as if absorbed in her task; "then I resign."

With this she passed under the portico and mounted the staircase. There was ample time to secrete one tiny billet in the pocket of her dress as she did so.

"There," she exclaimed, as she threw half-a-dozen letters on the table. "Now don't pretend to look as though you did not care

about them. We are pledged not to disturb you, so, having done my duty, I retire."

She did retire, and Claude took the letters with a trembling hand. He scanned the familiar addresses. They were all business letters, most of them from publishers, one marked "Immediate" from the Clapham Theatre. There was none from Ada.

He opened them mechanically, and read their contents. The theatrical one alone interested him, for in it he was besought to come to London and attend a rehearsal of his piece. The rest had all one import—a demand for "copy;" but Othello's occupation was gone. He could produce nothing at present.

He made an excuse to go out and call at the Mitre. The letters might not all have been sent on. It was his last hope, and he felt himself walking quite wearily along the little street, for he was conscious that the hope was well nigh a forlorn one.

There was a look of sympathy on the faces of many people he met, which might have

been due simply to the knowledge that he was hardly used in respect of his curacy, for of course the knowledge of the affair had spread over Sturminster by this time. One or two of those who greeted him, however, actually asked about the Parkinsons, as their sudden exodus was beginning to be talked about. Among these were Misses Tart and Souchong, who were hunting in a couple that morning, and were said to do so frequently about post-time, that they might see who got letters, and whence they came, if possible.

"Good morning, Mr. Vallance," said Miss Souchong, "I am sorry to hear we are going to lose you."

"Then let me relieve that sorrow—no doubt shared by you, Miss Tart. I am not going." And he told them of his change of residence.

"My friends the Parkinsons," he continued, "are gone to London. I shall run up for a few days, and then return and settle quietly down to work."

These were his plans, as far as he had any. He could not bear this suspense long. The pair of sirens proceeded on their way to announce his movements. So the Parkinsons were gone to London, were they? and Mr. Vallance was going up to town—of course, to see Ada. What would Mrs. Clara Thornton say to that?

In the meantime, while they were thus discussing the state of affairs, and Claude having called at the Mitre to no purpose, was walking irresolutely towards the Combe Dean road, Clara was buried in the thickest shrubbery around Pomona House, and throwing herself on a garden-seat, deliberately drew from her pocket Ada Parkinson's letter to Claude, and broke the seal. There was no hesitation, no anxious look around. Clara was no timid girl. What she had to do she did. The letter was as follows. It was scribbled with pencil on a scrap of paper, and evidently written in haste:—

"MY DEAREST CLAUDE,—I have only one moment to write to you, as soon as possible after our arrival, for I know you will be full of anxiety on my account. The 'bust up' has come, as you will have inferred. I had such a scene with papa! I confessed all to him, except—except *you know what*. He was furious, and I was really afraid he would do me bodily violence. He hurried me off hither. I write now from the Great Western Hotel; but what our plans or ultimate destination may be I cannot guess. I find he has been in communication with the Bishop. I do hope he has not got you into any difficulty. I wish I could ask you to write; but until we settle somewhere, it is of no use. Besides, my letter would be intercepted. Papa has dared me to write to you; but I owe a higher duty, since *what has occurred between us*. I do not know how I shall ever get this posted, unless I can make friends with the chambermaid. I am a prisoner, to all intents and purposes, and papa scarcely speaks to me. Your situation

must be almost worse, I fear. I know what your last resource would have been, and I am free to say I would have been ready to fall in with your plans, but this sudden flight prevented the possibility of my communicating with you. Look out for every post. I will write whenever I have a moment.

“Ever your own,

“A. M. F.”

“What does A. M. F. mean, I wonder?” said Clara to herself. “It looks as though the child expected her letter to be read by somebody else, or why does she subscribe it A. M. F., instead of A. P.; and what does the chit mean by the passages underlined, I wonder?”

“I should burn that document as soon as I’d booked the address and contents,” said a low whisper over her shoulder, which made her start, and instinctively crush the letter in her hands. “Oh, it’s only me; you needn’t be frightened. Only, if you don’t

burn it, you're dead certain to leave it in the pocket of that dress, when it goes to the wash. How is she, and where is she? May I see?"

Oliver Jones, for it was he, took the letter without waiting for permission.

"There is no address, and nothing to book," said Clara, half disposed to resent his familiarity. "You can burn the precious document yourself."

"I will," he said, and walked off reading it.

So there was no doubt about it, Claude was clandestinely engaged to Ada, and the recent exodus of the Parkinsons, and probably the difficulty with the Bishop, were connected with that fact. She did not know it had gone so far; and even now she was troubled as to the scored passages, for Jones had never mentioned, even to her, the scene in the church. She would need all her energies, she must exercise her most potent spells; but she did not shrink from the difficulty. "I will move Heaven and

earth but I will wean him from that chit," she said, quite articulately to herself; and really her strong volition seemed almost instantaneously to tell upon Claude.

When he drifted to the spot where so lately they had read "Festus" together, and the contrast between that happy time and the blank present came back upon him, he felt something like anger supervene upon his despair. Why had not Ada found some means of communicating with him before their hasty retreat? Supposing, as he could not for a moment doubt, that a scene had occurred with her papa, why did she not fly at once to him? It was not as though they had never discussed such a contingency. Above all, why did she not write? He would go to London; yes, but in what better position would he be when he got there? He would order his letters to be sent thither, of course, but in that way he would lose a post; and, as far as he could see, no letters were likely to come. It is thus men argue. They are so little liable to be constrained in their own

actions that they make no allowances for women who a hundred times in every day feel the galling restraints due to their sex.

He sat dreamily on the very spot, as nearly as he could fix it, where they had been sitting that happy morning, and whence they had risen to go to their strange espousal. It was one of the most beautiful in all those brave old woods, and one that would have tempted a landscape-painter to have lingered long and lovingly there. A slight break in the dense foliage was made by a little noisy brooklet which sped along amid a dense mass of underwood, and only here and there came into sight. There seems something weird in the monotonous cadence of the water rippling over the pebbles, especially when we have been listening to it for some time. The whole scene gradually grew instinct with life. There seemed a presence near him other than that of the mute objects he could see with his bodily eyes, a voice more articulate than that of the noisy brooklet seemed still to re-echo the treasured sentences

that had fallen from the lips of Ada. Is it so that sounds as well as persons haunt the places where they have lived? Does anything ever die? The viewless voice, as well as the living being, does it still live on? It seemed to there, in that haunted spot in the dear old woods. All the recent past lived over and over again as Claude sat and dreamed away the summer morning in a reverie that might have been pleasant but that he was half angered by the thought—she might have written—might have come to me.

Clara Thornton knew as well as though Claude had told her in words, the process of argumentation by which he was led to the conclusion he announced at luncheon time.

“I am going to London by the mid-day train to-morrow. Have you any commands for the metropolis, ladies?”

“If you could take the ladies en masse we should be glad,” was Mrs. Thornton’s reply. “We don’t care much for the season, so-called, because we are not—may I say it,

Mr. Vallance?—not *swells*. But I do like to go to London before everybody has left it. So you shall take us, I think."

Claude was really afraid for the moment that she meant it, but Mrs. Villars came to the rescue. They could not go to Portland Place for pretty well a month yet, perhaps not until the winter, but she hoped Mr. Vallance would take up his abode there, where he would find room enough and to spare.

"I will certainly transfer my household gods for a day or two from Pomona House to Portland Place, Mrs. Villars. If I had not recently escaped from clerical leading-strings, and if Miss Ethel there were not certain to tell Mr. Gules, I would confess that the object of my visit is to attend a rehearsal at the Clapham Theatre."

"How decidedly nice," said Clara; "I should so like to have gone on the stage."

"Never too late to mend," replied Claude. "I think it would suit you exactly. Come with me, I will introduce you to the manager."

"Oh, you think it would suit me, do you, Mr. Vallance? That may be a left-handed compliment if I liked to take it so. You consider me an actress, do you?"

"I did not say so; but you have the dramatic faculty."

"I understand. Just fancy what Tart and Souchong would say if I did accompany you to town to-morrow. I've half a mind to do it, if only to set their tongues wagging."

"Clara, my dear!" remonstrated Mrs. Villars. She had continually to curb this wild spirit of her eldest daughter. Ethel and Emily never gave her any trouble. They were always employed with their devotions and poetry.

"Don't scold me, mamma. Am I not a British matron?"

She would have done it on the smallest provocation: would have defied the proprieties and gone to London with him. In the first place, however, she was quite sure he did not want her—yet; and in the second, she must attend to her postal duties.

"I will forward all your letters for you while you are away," she added. "You will be here over post time, to-morrow, though."

Why did no suspicion strike Claude? She was always harping upon that string—his letters.

"Yes, I shall remain over post time to-morrow; and may get a missive that will stop my expedition."

"I don't expect it," said Clara; and she did not. Although she would have liked to frustrate this journey to London, and kept her cavalier by her side, she was not going to let a letter stop him—at least, not that particular letter which he was expecting, and which might have had the effect of separating him from her for ever. She trusted to the chances—and they were manifold—of Claud and Ada not meeting, and relied on her own powers of fascination to fill the void that would thus be left in his capacious heart. Her plans were laid with a skill worthy of a better cause.

"And when will the prodigal return?"

asked George Villars, who had joined the party.

"The Brabazon Lodge dinner is on Tuesday week. I would not miss that on any account. I shall no doubt meet the Bishop, so my absence will not be long."

The next morning, as far as Claude was concerned, was but a repetition of the last. There really was no letter from Ada, only the usual instalment of business communications. At mid-day he set off for town. Arriving in the evening, he drove first of all to Portland Place, dined at the Aborigines' Club, and went in the evening to the Clapham Theatre.

When he got back into the grooves of London life once more, the past six months seemed like as a dream when one awakes, a pure and peaceful vision, but intangible as a dream of the night. As he sat in his accustomed chair at the Aborigines' Club, and listened to the chat of its Bohemian members, or afterwards lolled in his box at the theatre, amid the glare of the lamps, and

squeaking of the fiddles, and paced the boards between the pieces along with the manager, he seemed to be in a new world. The quiet Combe Dean woods and all the tittle-tattle of Sturminster seemed impossibilities to him. Is it not so that when we change our sphere of existence—perhaps change it over and over again—we shall look back from one to the other with but the faintest reminiscence, and deem the preceding stage almost an unreality? Is that the secret of the strange flashes of consciousness that do come across us, glimpses either of experiences foreign to this world, or of previous existence here?

But whilst all else seemed faded like the baseless fabric of a vision, there was one phase of recent experience that was but too real for him—his love for Ada, and her loss. He glanced round the peopled boxes as though by some strange coincidence he expected to see her there—even looked down the long line of the ballet, as if she might not improbably be among the gauze-kirtled

coryphées. Back to the Aborigines' Club he hied him, and over the steaming punch bowl talked deep into the small hours with a few congenial spirits who were glad to welcome him back to town, and disposed to chaff him as to the rude disruption of his rural fantasies. They even toasted John Glastonbury, and coupled that right reverend name with the bacchanalian refrain of "He's a jolly good fellow," for having wielded his crozier like a fairy wand and spelled Claude Vallance back to his old haunts. A fairy wand! Yes, there had been such, and it seemed even now to beckon him away to the dear spot in Combe Dean woods; but the good fairy was gone, and Claude, like the persecuted knight in one of the mimic stage stories, went wandering, woebegone, in search of her.

Next morning, and the next, and the next—O that wearisome to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow!—he looked on the slab as he entered the dreary mansion in Portland Place, or on his table in

the breakfast-room, which was turned into his sanctum, seeking for the letter that never came. In its place was a daily budget from Clara, enclosing his other letters, and containing all the news of Sturminster, told in the most bewitching fashion. Mrs. Thornton was one of those women who are far more numerous than we suppose; she had the literary faculty to a very exceptional degree, and only did not write in the technical sense of the word, because she had never trained it, and therefore did not rely upon her powers: just as probably we could most of us swim, as all the lower animals can, only we distrust our capacity, and therefore sink instead.

Among these items of intelligence were two that chiefly concern the interests of our story; first, it was more than rumoured that a successor had been found for the curacy of Combe Dean—so rapidly that it almost looked as though the vacancy were created for him—in the person of a young Evangelical curate, with weak eyes and downy

whiskers (so Mrs. Thornton described him), who was going to bear off one of the multitudinous Misses Johnson; and whom John Glastonbury was supposed to have located near Sturminster, so as to be ready in case of anything happening to Mr. Denton. The second was, that George Villars had bought the *East Clodshire Gazette*, and begged that Claude would forthwith accept the post of editor at a fancy salary, and devote all his powers to that mighty organ of provincial intelligence. Such an arrangement would square with his continued residence at Pomona House, which Mr. Villars—still through Mrs. Thornton—hoped he would prolong *sine die*; while the editorial rooms attached to the printing-office of the *Gazette*, in High Street, Sturminster, would serve as bachelor chambers for him whenever he wished to be alone.

“Your position as editor of the local paper will be useful to you in reference to John Glastonbury, and your friends in general;” wrote George Villars, as a supple-

ment to Clara Thornton's longer letter. "Already my purchase has borne fruits. I am invited to the gathering at Brabazon Lodge, for which you had previously received an invitation. Sir Charles Wentworth, a Radical relation of the Duke, and future candidate for the suffrages of Clodshire, will be there, and is anxious to meet you. So no refusal. Radical principles and beer" (he alluded to the Stomachic Ale) "will carry the day, and are more in your line than preaching over the heads of the yokels, or attending Dorcas Meetings with Tart, Souchong & Co. I hope you will accept my offer. If you don't like my terms, name your own."

"P.S.—You *must* accept," wrote Mrs. Clara. "I will be your sub-editor myself, if that will prove an inducement.

"P.P.S.—Any news of the Parkinsons?"

There were *no* news of the Parkinsons; but Claude did not say so. He shirked the question, and devoted his letter to an accept-

ance of Mr. Villars's proposal. It seemed to form about the best excuse for his continued residence in Sturminster; and for the present he wished to remain there, so as to preserve what was the only chance of finding his little love so mysteriously spirited away from him.

"Let us," Claude wrote, "sign and seal the engagement for three months certain; you will then see how you like my work." Mrs. Thornton he elected forthwith on his staff, "not," as he said to her, "in the paste-and-scissors capacity of sub., but as assistant editor. I believe greatly in the mixed system of teaching," he added, "from infant-school education upwards—even to the instruction of my Clodshire readers in politics and social science. There are many questions a woman can handle better than a man; and where, even if she did not write, her advice and counsel would be invaluable."

For the present he wished to secure a position which should bring him within the

possible orbit of Ada, yes; but, ever and anon, as the days went by, and no tidings came, a doubt, which he almost felt to be devil-born, crossed his mind. Was Ada true to him? would anything short of physical impossibility prevent her writing to him? and when was it ever physically impossible for a woman to do what she wished, and made up her mind to do? But at such times his memory went back to the recent day when she had knelt with him before the altar-rail in the little church, and repeated those words which he knew she felt binding; and to the evening before her mysterious disappearance, when her passionate affection for him had far exceeded all previous manifestations, for she was not, as a rule, demonstrative; and he sometimes jokingly attributed to her a coldness which he well knew she did not feel. He was glad, therefore, when the manager of the Clapham Theatre proposed, in a very flattering way, that, as his piece would undoubtedly be a great success, it should not be

produced at the fag-end of a season, but deferred until the commencement of the next. He resolved, therefore, to go back to Sturminster as soon as possible, and bury himself in his new duties.

"I have often boasted," he soliloquized, "that I could wash, walk, or work any nonsense out of me. Now is the time for the experiment, only—only," he added, "this isn't nonsense, and I don't think it *will* wash."

It was at the Aborigines' Club he indulged in this brown study, when he had gone in for the last time in order to get his letters—business letters only. One of the *habitués* of that exceedingly sociable haunt addressed him—

"Well, Vallance, old fellow, I hope you've come back for good and all now. You ain't going among the chawbacons any more, are you?"

"On the contrary, I am off to-night."

"Is it tub-thumping proper, I wonder, that is the attraction; or is there a girl in the case?"

"Tub-thumping is at an end, for the present at all events ! I return as editor of the *East Clodshire Gazette*."

"The deuce you do ! A very respectable old Conservative rag. Let me do your London Letter for you, old fellow."

"You shall, as soon as I get things into shape ; but I don't think you'll find the rag very Conservative when once I get settled in my editorial chair."

"Egad, no ; you are a red-hot Radical parson, I know ; but take my advice, make no sudden changes. Is there money at the back?"

"My good friend Villars—the Stomachic Ale man—has bought the rag."

"Villars ! Why he's a Midas. You may change your colours at once, then, and defy the Brabazon interest."

"I mean to change the colour, but not to defy the Brabazon interest. What if I combine Brabazon Lodge and beer?"

"Then you'll carry everything before you. Don't forget the London Letter. I can give you some first-rate political tips."

"It's yours, old fellow. Good-by."

Claude ran down to Sturminster by the night mail, and would have been in the best of spirits as to his new work if he had not been haunted by the doubt as to Ada.

Letter after letter came from the poor child, and every one was ruthlessly destroyed by Mrs. Thornton and Oliver Jones. After a brief stay in London she had gone to Boulogne, "where," she said in her last, "papa has business which causes me great uneasiness. I long to tell you all, Claude, but cannot bring myself to do so until I get a reply from you. Your long silence makes me think either that my letters do not reach you, or that you are offended at my going with papa instead of coming to you. Do write, if it be but a line to say you get this. Address *Poste Restante, Boulogne-sur-Mer.*"

Gradually the letters got more and more despondent, and then ceased altogether.

"That little impediment being removed from your path, Mrs. Thornton, what do

you propose to do for me?" asked Oliver Jones, producing his counterpart of the bond.

"Put that in your pocket, and I will give you my advice. Take your holiday now; go over to Boulogne. Ada will be sure to look kindly on you as a relic of Sturminster, or at all events to speak to you, and see what news she can get."

"What shall I tell her?"

"Tell her Claude Vallance is living at Pomona House, and is——" She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Is—*engaged to me*. Don't be afraid. It won't be a lie much longer."

"I don't care if it is."

The dinner at Brabazon Lodge was quite an event. It was a regular shuffling of the cards in the Sturminster pack. Never before had a brewer and a curate crossed that august threshold. Claude was placed next the Bishop at dinner, and made himself so agreeable that John Glastonbury, carried

away by his *bonhomie*, felt he had been a little precipitate, though he did not quite see how he could have otherwise provided for his prospective son-in-law. Claude even alluded to his brief connexion with the Sturminster clergy and his alleged unorthodoxy in a light and airy way, which made the Bishop feel anything but comfortable, while the Duchess and Mrs. Tuft Hunter were in ecstasies of admiration, for Sir Charles Wentworth, in whose honour the repast was given, had infected the whole household with his advanced notions. Sir Charles, who would contest the borough on extreme Radical principles, included bishops in the institutions which were to be improved off the face of the earth, and openly told John Glastonbury so at dinner.

“We shall make due provision for vested interests, of course, my lord; but the bench as an institution is *in extremis*. In the meantime Mr. Vallance, being released from the fetters of the Establishment, and installed as editor of Mr. Villars’s able journal,

will forthwith open a Free Church in the Temperance Hall."

"Mr. Vallance will do something much better than that I hope," said his lordship, who was as literal as Squire Atkins himself. He too listened to the threat, and said beneath his breath—

"I shouldn't in the least wonder."

Thus did Claude Vallance merge into lay life at Sturminster. He settled himself down in his rooms at Pomona House and his editorial sanctum in the High Street, where Sir Charles Wentworth often looked in and smoked a cigar. Sunday after Sunday he sat under Mr. Denton and Cyprian Gules at Sturminster, or went over with Mrs. Thornton to Combe Dean and heard tender-eyed and weak-voiced Mr. McLachlan simper diluted Puritanism in his old pulpit.

"Really it makes me glory in my black tie, Mrs. Thornton," he said, "when I hear the nonsense these fellows talk."

"I always told you it was *infra dig.*, did I not?"

"You did. Woman judges intuitively on these matters where we laboriously argue——"

"And as a rule come to ruinously wrong conclusions," added Clara, finishing his sentence for him.

Only now and then when he took a solitary walk to the old spot, and heard the prattling brooklet make its music precisely as it had made it that summer morning, did his mind revert to the golden dream that had gone from him.

"I have sometimes wondered," he said to himself, as he sat there reading the very lines of "Festus" he had read to Ada, "whether in advancing conditions of existence we retain the affections we felt here, and which seem so efficient in forming our characters now, or whether, having served their turn, they drop off. They seem—or seemed—so beautiful and good that one cannot bear to think them ephemeral. But may not that be only our present short-sighted view? No doubt it is. No shadow of doubt. I can

see an index of the change in that which has come over me. Ada would have resented this life, which is surely higher than that of a mere curate of a country town, and—and Clara (he thought of her by her Christian name now)—Clara *hates parsons.*"

Such was Claude's amended version of his improved motto, "Post mortem fidelis—faithful after death!" Could he only have seen the poor persecuted little girl he so wronged in his thoughts, wearily pacing the Boulogne sands, and asking, "Why does he not write to me—why does he not write?"





CHAPTER VIII.

A CLERICAL COUP D'ETAT.

F all the conspirators who had taken part in the little plot against Claude Vallance, the one who had least reason to congratulate himself on success was poor Cyprian Gules. He had been beguiled into it almost inadvertently by the episcopal strawberries and cream ; and, even where he did act as a voluntary agent, he really shaped his course by a sort of wrong-headed idea of duty. He sacrificed his friend on the altar of Anglicanism ; that was about the way he would have put it in his own orthodox language. If he could only have worn a cope and assumed the eastern position in the process, he would probably have thought it more satisfactory. As it was he felt the Bishop had pumped him, and Atkins

made a clerical cat's-paw of him, while even Captain Parkinson and Oliver Jones had utilized him. He overrated his own importance, as High Church curates sometimes do; but still he was rather like one of those imaginary puppets Mr. Charles Mathews pretends to pull in the "Game of Speculation." Worst of all was the catastrophe of an Evangelical colleague. Broad Church principles were very dreadful; but Claude had been eclectic, and only laughed at Gules's eccentricities, which he termed "pretty"—Ritualism on the whole *was* pretty, Claude said—but sore-eyed Mr. McLachlan went up and down the parish denouncing Cyprian Gules in the most uncomplimentary way as bearing resemblance to a certain red lady of doubtful character. Vallance was a gentleman, Gules said, which McLachlan certainly was not. Many, therefore, were the private confabs which Gules and Ethel had over recent occurrences; and it was agreed that as a matter of penance it was only right Cyprian should offer Claude some explana-

tion. The worst of it was that Vallance took the matter so easily Cyprian could not get a word with him.

"Not another syllable, my dear boy," he would answer, patting the Curate's back and laughing at his serious visage. "Whatever you did was done from a sense of duty, I'm sure. I don't want and won't hear any explanation! I accept all your apologies before you make them, and exonerate you in every way without putting you to the trouble of explaining. Nay more, I thank you heartily for relieving me from what I now feel was an irksome position. There, run away, for I am excogitating a leader, and Ethel I know wants to talk to you about some church matters."

"You know, Ethel dear," continued poor Gules, as he narrated his experiences to his lady-love, "one has no chance with such a perversely good-natured fellow as this. Besides I really wanted to consult Vallance seriously about my own position. It's enough to make one secede from Anglicanism to

have such a firebrand as McLachlan for a colleague. But there, I suppose Vallance would only tell me the embrace of Mother Church was wide enough to include a McLachlan as well as myself."

"But you spoke of secession. You surely would not join what you have so often denounced to me as the 'Roman heresy.'"

"Certainly not. If I left the Anglican Communion I should join the Greek Church. I like the name—the *Orthodox* Eastern Church—it is so nice to be orthodox, and then——" Cyprian hesitated and blushed—

"Then what?"

"The clergy is not a celibate one." And Ethel immediately felt her sympathies drawn out towards the Holy Eastern Church too.

The *Clodshire Gazette* had grown already under Claude's fostering care. Its circulation had doubled, and so had the number of its columns. Its politics slowly but sensibly changed from mild Conservatism to advanced Liberalism, whilst the literary

element was made so acceptable to mammas and daughters that no paterfamilias, however pig-headed, dared to give it up, though its opinions might be as gall and wormwood to him. Mr. Atkins was the only one who wrote to discontinue his subscription, and even he, whenever he dropped into the Mitre bar, stole a furtive glance at Claude's *feuilleton*, "Love in a Village," some of the sentiments and not a few of the expressions in which he felt certain he could attribute to his adored Clara—adored, alas! more at a distance than ever since Claude had been quartered at Pomona House. The Evans contingent in vain sought to effect a reconciliation between the Squire and the editor. There was no outward breach indeed between them, but everybody knew how—and why—Atkins detested Claude Vallance. This involved, too, a chance of the half-dozen virgins losing both these magnates, for the weak-eyed Mr. M'Lachlan had "taken up" with them, and they became violently Evangelical for the time being,

while the new-fledged Curate denounced the Squire as "worldly," and the ex-Curate as "carnal."

"Fancy," said the tender-eyed one with his mouth full of muffin, "a minister of the Gospel prostituting his ability so far as to edit a provincial journal!"

The provincial journal was nevertheless, as we have said, a grand success, and as fertile a source of wealth to Mr. Villars as the Stomachic Ale itself had been. Though not by any means averse to added resources—for had he not three daughters to dower?—George Villars prized still more the influence which the possession of the paper brought him. Brabazon Lodge and Pomona House were on visiting terms without the intervention of Mrs. Tuft Hunter; and Sir Charles Wentworth came down to the office every day, and, it was said, inspired the whole of the political leaders, if he did not actually write them. Claude made no secret of this. He laughed at the halo of impenetrable mystery which is made to surround every

penny newspaper office. The *Clodshire Gazette* was of the high-priced "respectable" order, and he was half-inclined to drop the anonymous even in the editorial matter. Had he done so, astonished Clodshire would have seen that while many of the political leaders came from the pen of Sir Charles, and the ecclesiastical ones generally from Claude, not a few of the social topics were discussed by the graceful pen of Mrs. Clara Thornton, while little Oliver Jones handled now and then a legal topic. Claude heaped coals of fire on the little creature's head by the same course of conduct as he pursued towards Gules.

"I know you were animated by pure Protestant zeal," he said, "when you paid a certain memorable visit to Glastonbury Palace, Mr. Jones, and I hope the Bishop compensated you for loss of time with something more substantial than strawberries and cream, or even five o'clock tea. However, let's to business."

That was Claude's one rule of life now :

"let's to business." Even Clara had to subject herself to it, and caught the contagion too, though she would fain have had more frequent intervals of love-making. Claude used to bring up of an evening, to Pomona House a carpet-bag full of novels, or other light literature, for review, and make the girls read them, give him the plot, or write notices themselves. Ethel, aided by Gules, dissected the religious literature; and as for Emily, she was in a perpetual condition of ink and poetry. The London publishers who knew Claude found he gave useful critiques of their works; and the critical portion of the *Gazette* made it quite an "organ" far beyond the radius of its own county. Even Miles Denton did the University intelligence, and was proud to have a hundred cards printed with the adjunct of "Representative of the *East Clodshire Gazette*" in the left-hand corner.

Poor John Glastonbury—since it is possible, in one respect, for even a Bishop to be poor—found that his sledge-hammer method

for stamping out Broad Churchmanship from his diocese had thus signally failed in Claude's case. Every week there appeared in the *Gazette*, which spread it over an area a hundred times larger than would have been covered by a sermon, some leader on Church subjects, carrying the fascinated reader on to latitudinarianism in religious matters, as well as radicalism in politics. His foes were literally they of his own household, or prospectively so, for Mr. McLachlan was actually agitating for a Dissenting chapel in Sturminster, to stem the tides of Rationalism and Ritualism against which he himself felt as impotent as Dame Partington, with mop and pattens, pushing back the Atlantic Ocean.

"A nice mess you have made of it," John Glastonbury was mean enough to say to poor Twister one day. "Why did you not tell me the influence this man Vallance had before letting me proceed to extremities with him? He's turning not only the

diocese but the whole country-side topsy-turvy."

"Excuse me, but I thought the probability of his doing so was the very reason for your lordship wishing to be rid of him."

"Exactly, Twister, but we haven't got rid of him. We have fixed him, made him permanent. A curate may be locomotive. I could have given him one of the Meritorious-curate livings at one hundred and fifty or two hundred pounds a year, in an out-of-the-way corner of the diocese; but an editor of the local journal is fixed, and will be a thorn in my side, Twister. This leader on 'Old Bottles' is far more damaging than any score of sermons. He actually takes those words from to-morrow's lesson; his leaders are sermons in disguise, and he says the episcopal bench are the old bottles, and the new wine is dead certain to burst us up. There are half a dozen allusions evidently intended for me, and so plain that every shopkeeper in Sturminster and Glastonbury

can read them. I wish to goodness we had given Bridget to him, along with one of the son-in-law livings, instead of to that noodle McLachlan."

"I wish we had, my lord. Broad Church principles would have done far less harm in Sturminster than Radical leaders. But then there was the lady, you recollect."

"All nonsense; as you and I knew perfectly well at the time. Why, that was a mere nine-days' wonder, and seems to have died a natural death. Of course, Vallance will marry one of the Villars girls. It's his policy to do so."

The Lord Bishop of Glastonbury had no idea of anybody marrying except from policy. Sydney Smith says a Bishop can't flirt. Certainly no one could picture hard-faced John Glastonbury a victim of the tender passion.

"I sat next the man at Brabazon Lodge the other day, and found him quite amusing—quite am——. Why, Twister, what in the name of fortune is this!" cried his lord-

ship, turning over a damp sheet of the *Clodshire Gazette* for the day. "Will you tell me what that means? Read it, man."

At the head of the "Local Ecclesiastical Intelligence," which column John Glastonbury always read with fear and trembling, stood the announcement—

"PREFERMENT.—The Rev. Claude Vallance, M.A., Fellow of St. Boniface, and formerly Curate of Sturminster, to be Private Chaplain to his Grace the Duke of Brabazon."

In a paragraph which came farther down in the same column it was deliberately added that the long-disused chapel at Brabazon Lodge would be opened forthwith for Sunday service. "We are not aware," ran the announcement, "whether the chapel is episcopally licensed, but in the event of any difficulty occurring on that score, it will be registered as a Free Christian Church. There has long been felt the want of some place of

worship in the neighbourhood of Brabazon Lodge, and also, it may be added, of a ministry which shall be the exponent of more liberal doctrines than those promulgated at the neighbouring churches. Beneath the pastorate of the Rev. Claude Vallance, those who sat under him at Combe Dean will be well aware they will find spiritual food of the kind they require. It is also rumoured that a secular lecture on political or social subjects will be delivered every Wednesday evening in the chapel."

"What do you think of that, Mr. Twister? Whose fault is this?"

"If your lordship asks me to speak frankly, I should say Mr. McLachlan's."

It was. McLachlan opened the door for a Dissenting chapel, and Brabazon Lodge came to the rescue. "If there are to be Dissenters," said the Duke, "let us by all means have them in our interest. I should prefer to keep the chapel Church of England, though as broad as you like—I mean you, Sir Charles, and you, Mr. Vallance.

If the Bishop interferes we'll register the place, and be Nonconformist forthwith."

This was a grand *coup*, and pleased even Clara Thornton, who "hated parsons." It was the straitlaced, stereotyped model of the inferior clergy she could not stand. Anything a little heterodox and out of the way she could manage. Claude Vallance was in this respect, as in all others, to her taste.

In deference to his literary calling, Claude had now adorned his upper lip with a heavy moustache, whilst he still shaved his chin and cheek. He always dressed in sombre black, and had entirely discarded that badge of ecclesiasticism—the white tie. The project of the private chapel originated with Sir Charles Wentworth, and was much to Claude's taste. He hoped by all means to keep it within the pale of the Establishment, and rather fancied, he said, that Mr. Denton, who had the right of objection, would not oppose the opening of the chapel. He calculated aright. Mr. Denton drove over to

Glastonbury, where he found the Right Reverend John scarcely recovered from the effects of the journalistic bombshell which had exploded in the palace, while Twister had retired to the rooms of a lively minor canon to chuckle over the discomfiture of their spiritual father. They would have liked nothing better, had they dared to call their small souls their own, than to cast in their lots with Claude.

"Give him rope enough," was the policy mutually agreed upon by the Bishop and the Rector. The possible consequence they left understood but not expressed. Claude had studiously avoided asking the Bishop for a licence for the chapel or for himself, and also refrained from soliciting the Rector's leave to open the chapel or to officiate. He thought it best to take the bull by the horns, and throw on the authorities the onus of interfering with him. The lay triumvirate, backed up by the local newspaper, with the resources of Pomona House and Brabazon, were too strong even for a

Bishop and a Rector. It was a foreshadowing on a small scale of the Bismarck policy that was then looming in the immediate future. The Church and the World were arrayed one against the other at Sturminster, and the World seemed likely to be one too many for the Church. Each had condescended to borrow the other's weapons. The Right Reverend John, for the demolition of an unpopular curate, had brought to bear such secular power as he possessed ; but the worm turned, and Claude Vallance assailed the Bishop *via* the private chapel of Brabazon Lodge.

Now, at all events, there was no need for people to dissemble, and Claude experienced the sensation of all men speaking well of him. The Mitre bar resounded his praises, and even Squire Atkins dared not say it nay when he read the portentous announcement in the *East Clodshire Gazette*. Brown, Jones, and Robinson congratulated him heartily, and hoped there would be a spare corner for them in the chapel of Brabazon Lodge if

they might take such a liberty, &c. Even Miss Tart was swayed by the gentility of the arrangement, and had no word to wag against it, except so far as to be retrospective, and say she knew that man would get on if the girl—meaning Ada—was out of the way. Miss Souchong was heartily glad to have the opportunity of hearing Claude again without involving herself in any disagreement with the Rector. The multitude were profoundly ignorant of any ecclesiastical etiquette, and thought that whatever Brabazon Lodge did must be right. Miles Denton—instructed, it may be, by the home authorities, but more probably acting on his own impulse—wrote to ask if he might bring up his college surplice, and read the lessons the first Sunday. The only persons in dismay were the Dorcas Society and the sore-eyed curate. Gules and Ethel laughed in their sleeves at the turn events had taken.

In order to avoid the semblance of opposition to Mr. Denton, which all felt would be exceedingly ill taste, to say the least of

it, Claude arranged that the service at the chapel of Brabazon Lodge should take place in the afternoon, when it could only interfere with Gules's congregation, who were much too attached to their Gregorians to leave them for any other attraction. Many, including the important item of the six Misses Evans, had deserted and gone over to Mr. McLachlan's banner. Gules's congregation was very select, but it was very devoted too; and Claude would not, if he could, have tampered with it on any account.

The ducal chapel, which had long been disused, was a much larger one than might have been expected, and very perfect in its arrangements, dating back to a time when the family was Catholic, and their religious exercises had to be performed on sufferance. It was wainscoted with black oak, on which, as in the stained windows, were emblazoned the Brabazon arms and insignia in every possible device. On a modest dais at the east end stood a large black oak table,

which served for an altar and bore a plain cross of the same wood, flanked by two handsome candelabra and a splendid service of massive silver communion plate. These were of a much more recent date than the chapel itself; but the old gold monstrance was still among the relics of the Brabazon plate. There were no pews, but an infinite number of handsome prie-dieu chairs of oak and Utrecht velvet; the sides of the chapel being stalled with richly-carved misereres, and the back flanked with solid oak benches. The building accommodated a hundred and eighty or two hundred people with ease.

On the opening Sunday the place was quite full. Mr. McLachlan had given the Sturminster people a strong dose of Calvinistic theology that morning, and most of the congregation who had been present came up to have the effect taken off. All Claude's Combe Dean friends were there. The Rector had officiated at the hamlet church in the

morning, as he often did now, and had quite taken it for granted in subsequent conversations with the Combe Dean congregation that they would go. He had interposed no sort of veto, which was wise in the Rev. Mr. Denton. Besides these there were people who came out of curiosity from many a neighbouring parish, so that the chapel was quite full.

When the bell had ceased Claude entered in surplice, hood and stole, and took his place at the north side of the table, in a Glastonbury chair, Miles Denton, in his college surplice, occupying the opposite side. The service was a very short one, consisting of an abridgment of the Evening Prayer of the Church of England, made entirely after Claude Vallance's own devices. He omitted the Exhortation altogether, simply saying, after the opening text, "Let us pray," and so proceeding to the Confession, Absolution, and Lord's Prayer. The Psalms were chanted by the congregation without any regular choir, Mrs. Clara Thornton, who played the

harmonium close to the lectern, from which Claude read the prayers, leading the singing in her fine contralto voice. There was only one lesson, which was from the New Testament, and consisted of the Allegory of the Sower (Matt. xiii. 1-24), read in a nervous manner by Miles Denton. After the *Nunc Dimittis*, were read the Collect for the Day, the General Prayer and Thanksgiving, and Prayer of St. Chrysostom, the whole concluding with "the grace of our Lord," &c. The Apostles' Creed was omitted, Claude giving as his reason for this that the recitation of a creed was no part of worship, that it tended to promote dissension, and, as a fact, no two people held exactly the same creed any more than they had exactly the same features in their face.

The sermon, which was really an exposition of the lesson, and read, like it, from the lectern, touched but lightly on the special circumstances under which they were met; but what Claude did say was to the purpose. He began by sketching the beautiful group-

ing of the chapter in which the Allegory of the Sower occurred, and which we were apt to lose by a cursory reading. Moored by the sacred beach, the little boat in which the great Teacher made His temporary pulpit, commanded on one side a view of the blue eastern lake—that most majestic type of the “mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven”—on the other, of the spreading cornfields of Palestine, where doubtless some Eastern peasant was even then scattering the seed corn, and so supplied the text for the wondrous Preacher.

“Why do we not let our ordinary everyday avocations thus school us in the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven?” he asked. “Many of us have to follow our callings in the fields just as this Oriental husbandman in the lake-side corn-lands had, and most of those who listened to this masterly exposition of the great Parable of Nature. Others of us toil in shops, or offices, or studies; but where is any of us who may not find in his labour some one among the

numerous manifestations of this unsuspected word of God—the seed which fertilizes the fields of the world?”

* * * * *

“Is any labour secular?” he demanded. “May not all be consecrated in God’s sight by being done through unselfish desire of doing good?”

“Who shall dare to quarrel because such work is not done according to some hard-and-fast line of man’s devising? Here was the great Master Himself teaching in a fisherman’s boat, with the plashing lake for music and the blue sky for His chancel arch. Paul, driven from the synagogue by the same authorities that killed his Master, taught in the school of one Tyrannus, and in the house of Justus that joined hard by the synagogue.

“Why did they teach so? Why, when denounced as irregular, did they not fall back on the carpenter’s or the tent-maker’s work, and leave the Scribes and Pharisees to guide the national conscience? Why, because

they felt God's call, and dared not refuse to answer it. Silence was worse than schism.

"Sotoo—though I hate egotism, and would not willingly speak of self—I feel God's call. I have other work enough to fill my time, and for me to live by. But the life of the body is not all. The life of the intellect, grander and nobler though it be, even this is not all. I feel I have a message from God. It is not only that I have been professionally called to the clerical office; I do feel that I have a special work to do in the way of combining the sacred and secular influences of society, and broadening somewhat the often narrow views of religion which pass current; and, therefore, I gladly accept the offer of the proprietor of this chapel to speak to you once on Sunday upon matters specially termed sacred, just as on week days. I shall hope to speak to you here and elsewhere on topics in like manner termed secular. I want you to look on them all as sacred. I want you to make every day of the week just as sacred as Sunday. I

am no Sabbatarian, and would gladly see you go hence to a game of cricket on Sturminster meadows. I do not see why we should transact all our religion gloomily on the first day of the week, as though we were glad to get it over, and be purely secular for the other six.

“I hope we are opposing nobody in opening this chapel. There is positive work in religion enough and to spare without the wretched negative work of quarrelling with one another. I have no doubt the Pharisees honestly believed they were doing God good service by turning Paul out of the synagogue; and I am quite sure the Bishop of this diocese and the Rector of this parish thought they would benefit the diocese and the parish by stopping my voice. I do not think so, and you do not, or you would not be here to-day. Let us do our work quietly and unobtrusively here, and in course of time, very likely, they will not think so either.”

All this was reported in a paragraph of

three-quarters of a column in the next issue of the *Gazette*; and the "social" leader of that day, written, it may be mentioned, by none other than Mrs. Clara Thornton herself, set forth, in some remarkably clear and lucid sentences, the advantages of such an arrangement—in the way of keeping the spirit of inquiry true to the old lines of the Church of England. If the Establishment—so argued this article—was to deserve its name as the National Church, it must relax a little of its rigidity. The omission of the Creed, revolutionary though it might seem, was really the happiest symbol of this schismatical service. In fact, the schism was no schism, in the technical and offensive sense of the term, but calculated to prevent division and promote unity. So argued the fair leader-writer; and if she did not convince Clodshire in general, or Sturminster in particular, she gave them something to talk about the whole of the ensuing week. The Dorcas Society, headed by Mrs. Denton, as a sort of ecclesiastical Cassandra, lifted

up all its Briarean hands in blank dismay, and decided that the dispensation *was* closing in now; while poor Gules sent to Messrs. Cook & Co. to learn the expense of personally-conducted tours to Rome, as he had no idea how to get at the Holy Eastern Church. He could bear McLachlan no longer, and the Brabazon schism was too dreadful to think of. Squire Atkins decided that Clara Thornton was a "caution," and began to entertain Mormonite ideas as to the half-dozen Misses Evans; while Miss Tart and Miss Souchong were elevated to the seventh heaven of delight, by receiving invitations to a ducal *thé* at Brabazon Lodge. A general election was imminent, and Sir Charles Wentworth was to contest the county. Even old maids must not be neglected under such circumstances.

"Clara," said Claude Vallance, for they had all got to call one another by their Christian names now, "your leader was a triumph indeed. No such good thing has ever been done in the *Gazette*."

Amazon as she was, she felt a childish joy when Claude took her by both her white hands and said this. He had opened up a new world to her when he taught her to use her rare intellectual powers. But it was as yet a world of one hemisphere only, until she gained, as she felt certain she would gain, his love. He seemed to have their own position in his eye when he quoted, in the same number of the *Gazette* where her leader appeared, the following passage in one of his reviews:—

“Neither glory, nor work, nor invention satisfies these vehement souls. Love alone can gratify them, because, with their senses and heart, it *contents also their brain*; and all the powers of man, imagination like the rest, find in it their concentration and their employment. ‘Love is my sin,’ said Shakespeare, as did De Musset and Heine.”*

Ciara made no answer, or rather her reply was the most eloquent of all—silence,

* Taine's “*English Literature*,” vol. ii. p. 60.

a speechless look of those splendid eyes. They spoke volumes, and volumes which, if it must be confessed, were of no unpleasant reading to Claude Vallance.

Rightly or wrongly, this bold scheming woman felt that the other "hemisphere" was only a question of time.

When at last she found words, her speech took that dangerous turn of contrasting her present with her past existence.

"I often wonder now, Claude, how we all lived before you came. We did not live; we vegetated. Shall I ever forget that Twelfth Night party when you sauntered into the drawing-room, and flopped down beside little Ada Parkinson—the mysterious elf who has run away from us all? If you were to go now it would be simply impossible to drift back into the old ways. What should I do, for instance? I can't make puddings, and you have made it impossible for me to be idle."

"When I go you will edit the *Clodshire Gazette* yourself. You know quite as much

about the working of the paper as I do."

"No; I can play a respectable second fiddle now, thanks to your instruction; but were I to attempt principal first violin I should simply sprawl, like an inexperienced swimmer in deep water."

"Then you would get our talented London Correspondent up to edit, and go on with your leader-writing. But I don't quite see why we should calculate these contingencies, when I can assure you I have not the slightest idea of relinquishing my post as editor, or relieving Pomona House of my presence. No; you have taken me, and must keep me, for better or worse——"

"Till death us do part."

"Till death," he commenced, repeating her words; but the expression called up to memory another adage, "*Ad mortem fidelis*—Faithful to death:"—called up the woods at Combe Dean that summer morning so short a time ago. The early autumn had begun to redden those woods, but no winter

had swept over them yet. Over the hearts which had plighted their troth either to other what changes had not come! That little fair face came back, as by some magician's spell, at the mention of that broken tryst. But he must not think of it. Lethe was his only resource; and in good sooth, no such pleasant form of the fabled River of Forgetfulness occurred to him as this conversation with Clara Thornton. It were hard to say whether he quite calculated the impression he was making. Possibly he felt she was too strong-minded—not masculine-minded, she was not exactly that—but too independent and self-reliant to let her heart become seriously involved. She had spent her girlish day-dream—so perhaps he deemed—in her improvident marriage and early widowhood. He might have known better—that the master-passion does not always, perhaps does not often, synchronize with a first love, and that people who are not small and simpering are sometimes prostrated by it when it does come.

How seldom do we credit others with our own experiences!

"You seem to start at the mention of death," said Clara, not knowing the cause he had to be affected by the motto she had unconsciously quoted.

"No, not so. Heathen though I may be in other respects and according to the standard of John of Glastonbury, I have somewhat of the old Stoic in me in that respect. As I preach I feel. I believe this is only our chrysalis condition; to speak as an author, only a rather protracted Grub Street existence. When this large and unnecessarily complicated corporeal structure drops off, depend upon it we shall find the butterfly state infinitely superior."

"In the meantime these corporeal structures are very nice as well as necessary," she said, with a languishing look at Claude which sent the blood tingling throughout *his* corporeal structure. "Are they not, papa?" for George Villars had broken in upon their tête-à-tête.

"What, madam?"

"Claude is disparaging these corporeal structures of ours; and we all three of us are so well provided in that respect that I think it is literally lack of *esprit de corps*, don't you?"

"Come into the dining-room, girl, and let us attend to the corporeal structures in deeds not in words. Bring her in, Claude, will you, and don't encourage her in making any more bad puns."





CHAPTER IX.

DEAD HEARTS.

IF any right-minded reader could ever do so unorthodox a thing as quote "Don Juan," he—or more probably she—would be inclined to paraphrase the passage—

"But Juan, had he quite forgotten Julia?
And should he have forgotten her so soon?"

Claude had *not* forgotten Ada. There were times, as we have seen, when, at casual mention of a word, memory of her would surge up to the surface of his consciousness; but even when it did not, it was still there, down deep in his being, and exerting a strange influence on his heart. He thought of her much as we think of the dead; and he used to say to himself, when his despon-

dent fit was on him, that his heart seemed to have died with her. Probably most sensitive persons who have experienced that terrible event, the death of one very dear to them, have felt what he alluded to. The heart is dead. Alive though it may seem to the joys and sorrows of outer existence, it is not really so, but only galvanized into a mimicry and mockery of life. If he ever gave that heart to Clara Thornton, or to any one else, he would only have a dead heart to give; and were he to be honest, he would have to tell them so.

And what was the state of poor Ada's heart meanwhile?

Oliver Jones had taken his holiday as suggested, and passed it at Boulogne; or, as he Britannically phrased it, "Boolong." (Why is this word such a crux to British lips?) There he met the Parkinsons on the jetty and the sands, but escaped their notice, as small and insignificant people so easily do, while father and daughter were together. He wanted to see Ada by herself,

and had not long to wait. Her walks by the seashore were frequent; so he informed Mrs. Clara Thornton in a letter, from which we extract our information. For the present we elect to forego the novelist's privileges of omniscience and ubiquity, and simply to gather our narrative from ordinary sources.

"When first I spoke to her," wrote the voluble secretary, "she started—just as I have made her start over and over again, in Combe Dean woods. Then she recognised me, and talked quite pleasantly. She and her papa were here on business. A many people do come to Boulogne on business. I can't quite make out old Parkinson's, but I've a notion it is something in the betting line, which can't be carried on quite safely on English ground. The old gent" (this was a favourite expression of Jones's) "looks uncommonly seedy; and as though the branch business at Boulogne didn't thrive quite as well as the Combe Dean lay. 'From information I have received,' as the

police say (and I really think I should make a good detective), I find the folks at present occupying Dale House are in the same concern; that accounts for a tenant being found so soon. I tried to approach *my subject*, but then she cut up rough at once, so I dropped it, and went on talking about Sturminster. She seemed to like to listen, and sometimes asked a question, but mostly about Miss Tart or Mr. Gules, that I knew she didn't care a straw about; so I told her of the row with Mr. Vallance, that he had thrown up the Church, was working the *Clodshire Gazette* and a schismatical service at Brabazon Lodge; and that his marriage with you was only a question of time. Poor little girl, she gave a gasp at that. *Entre nous* (ain't I getting on with my French?) I'm afraid she still loves Mr. Vallance. But my information cleared the ground for myself and for you too. I shall make out the rest of my holiday here, with perhaps a day or two in Paris, and try to sound the old gentleman—I mean Captain

Parkinson. They look so down upon their luck now, that I should think even my modest savings might almost realize his idea of Ada 'marrying money.' By the way, I forgot to tell you of a start I had when I first spoke to her. You know she never wore rings. When she shook hands I noticed on the fourth finger of the left hand what I fancied at first was a plain gold ring. By-and-by she turned it round, and I saw it was a man's signet-ring, with a large blood-stone, and an inscription on it. I tried very hard to read what it was, but couldn't make it out. She always turned it away from me when she saw me looking at it. I don't remember Mr. Vallance ever wearing a ring, so perhaps it belongs to some other rival. It was a strange feeling I had all the time I was talking to Ada; it didn't seem as though I was talking to a living person, but a dead one. I remember seeing an Adelphi drama once, called 'The Dead Heart.' That was just the notion she gave me. *Her heart seemed dead."*

When Evangeline is seeking Gabriel, and they are close together, passing each other in sooth on the river—but Evangeline is asleep and does not see him, the poet indulges in the apostrophe—

“Angel of God! was there none to awaken the slumbering
maiden?”

So does it almost make one question a superintending Providence when two faithful hearts separated like these can slowly die, while their union would be life and bliss for each. Perhaps it is that such union would be happiness too entire, and might go to make earth what it was not meant to be, a perfect sphere. Our deepest emotions extend over the smallest fraction of present life. Possibly they must be ephemeral here; our capacities for enjoyment may be too imperfect to admit of their being more permanent. The few hours—they really were but few in the aggregate—which Claude had spent in those sweet stolen meetings with Ada seemed like glimpses of a better kind of existence to which he now looked back, as

Plato says our souls in their strange glimpses of anamnesis revert to an existence passed elsewhere, upon a better sphere, and with nobler surroundings than those wherein our present lots are cast. He was annoyed to find himself in his association with his fellow-creatures, often getting positively angry with other people, simply because they were other people and not Ada. So useless, stale, flat, and unprofitable had become to him all the uses of this world that, in his effort to live this down, he sometimes assumed an attraction he was far from feeling towards the society of others with whom he was brought in contact. This in a measure, but not altogether, explained his relations with Clara. He was thrown more with her than with any one else, and really at first almost acted a part in the interest he displayed in her. Then isolated acts deepened into a habit, and it became natural to him ; and so by degrees he got as it were behind the scenes of her truer nature, and found much there for which he had not given her credit.

Besides intellectual powers far beyond what he suspected, there was a depth of womanly feeling more profound than those who looked only on the stately exterior gave her credit for; and above all these towered intense love for him, which she did not even try to conceal from himself or others. She was perfectly happy now she had him to herself without fear of rivalry; and he was, of course, unconscious of the crooked means she had adopted of securing the supremacy in which she now exulted.

So old Mrs. Villars still fluffed about, repeating to others as well as herself her opinion that Clara would "do better this time;" while it was agreed on all hands that Claude Vallance and Mrs. Thornton would make a very good match; and of course what everybody says and thinks must be true.

Yet true was it at the same time that Claude's heart was dead. In that sense a casuist might say that he had fulfilled the

motto he had chosen. He was faithful to death.

But there was yet another dead heart among these sequestered scenes whose humble destinies come to have an influence on this history. One day Miles Denton, who was now staying in Sturminster on account of his semi-clerical functions, came to Claude and said—

“I wish you would run down to your old parish at Combe Dean, and see a poor girl you perhaps remember, Flower Fielding, who lives with her father and mother in the little white cottage on the skirt of the woods by the vestry entrance to the church. She is, as they say, ‘in trouble,’ and will impart her story to none but you.”

“I remember her well,” answered Claude, “a pretty, light-hearted child, whose very innocence I feared might one day bring her into ‘trouble,’ as you call it. Is it the old story?”

"Yes; in the main. Her parents are of very different characters. The father, a good, honest, hard-working labourer, as you know—by the way, he was your bell-ringer in the church—is determined to take the benevolent view of his little girl's fault, and to keep her by him still; while the mother, a hard-faced, cross-grained woman, greatly under the influence of the new curate, insists upon her leaving home before she brings disgrace upon them."

"And so going from bad to worse. I don't like interfering in parochial matters out of respect for your father, and, as a mere matter of etiquette, through regard for the new curate. But this is a case that must not be swayed by rules of etiquette. What view does the curate take?"

"Sides with the mother, and would drive the girl to the streets."

"Of course; the way nine-tenths of the clergy dispose of this little difficulty in our social system. Who is associated with her in this matter?"

"She will tell none but you. Will you see her?"

"Poor child, of course I will."

Yes, here were some more dead hearts. When Claude arrived at the little woodside cottage, having selected the dinner hour as the likeliest to find the family together, he saw the honest woodman eating his frugal meal *al fresco* in front of his modest abode, and his wife sitting at some distance waiting with a martyr-like air to carry in the delf when he had done. The man was glad to see him, but the woman looked grim and fierce as though she resented the intrusion.

"Good morning, Fielding—good morning, Mrs. Fielding. I have come to say a word or two with Flower. Is she in?" said Claude, without entering further on the subject of his visit.

"Yes, sir, walk in, do: and thank ye for coming," said the man, rising from his dinner, until Claude forced him to resume, saying he would like to be alone with his daughter.

"Much good may he do her," was the comment of Mrs. F., as he passed under the lowly doorway; "he's one of the philandering ones his-self."

"For that reason the fitter to talk to her, wife," replied the sturdy fellow. "You and your pa'son seem too good for the likes of us——"

"Of who?"

"Flower and me. I mean it, woman. You and your minister don't seem able to feel for the fallen."

"You call 'em fallen, I call 'em sinners. You can class yourself with that bussey if you like. I'm an honest married woman, and have no dealings with them as bring disgrace upon their home."

In the single sitting room of the tiny cottage Claude found the bright eyed child—she really was scarcely more—waiting with an abstracted air until her mother should bring her the "things" from father's dinner to wash up, for Mrs. Fielding saw no reason why she should not work as long as

she remained with them. The poor girl looked abashed yet pleased when she saw Claude, and when he took her kindly by the hand and led her to a seat by the hearth, she said with tears in her eyes—

“Thank you. I am sure, sir, I did not expect this; my mother tells me no good person will touch my hand now.”

“I’m not a good person, God knows, Flower; and if I’m not to touch you and try to give you a helping hand in your trouble, who is?”

“That’s what father says, sir; O he is good and kind, and kindness breaks my heart. Mother makes me hard like herself;” and there was a fierce lurid look in the girl’s light eyes, which boded ill for her future if the “hard” policy were adopted.

“Now, Flower, you must listen to me; for, though I am not ‘good,’ and feel only kindness for you, still I cannot palliate your fault. You have brought disgrace on two honest folks, as I can see by your tears you feel. You must do all you can to make it

fall as lightly as possible on them. I will provide for you in London for a time, where you shall be cared for as well as the noblest lady and the happiest mother in England. This I can do through the charity of a good woman, who has what is called a House of Compassion. But at the same time the first duty you have got to do is to confess all, either to me or your parents. You have not sinned alone, and it is only right that your accomplice should bear his share of the burden. Will you tell me or your father?"

"It was to tell you, sir, that I asked you to come."

"Who was it, Flower?"

"It was Mr. Oliver Jones, sir, Mr. Villars's secretary."

"And he has deserted you, child?"

"Yes, sir. He used to be down here every day. Now I haven't seen him for several weeks. I thought you would see him and——"

"Yes, he is away now. But does he know of your difficulty?"

"Yes, sir, but he only laughed like, and told me to name no names. He would see me through."

"And then he deserted you?"

"Yes, sir. Every one has, except father and you."

So there was another meaning in Mr. Oliver Jones's frequent presence at Combe Dean, apart from his detective business and canvassing for the Stomachic Ale. Claude said a few more kindly words to the girl, and set her parents at one again by telling them he would send her up to London, and get her placed in a good situation, supposing she proved repentant. There was no need to parade the name of her betrayer, or to make a nine days' wonder of the matter at all. "Be kind to your daughter, Mrs. Fielding," he added, "during the few days she will be with you. It is quite possible to be so without compromising yourself or excusing her fault. Perhaps we all have a share in the fault too, you know. If we, her parents and her parson, had

looked more carefully after the poor child, this might never have happened."

"Just what I say, sir," said the sturdy father, preparing to go forth to his work again. "Good-by, mother," he added to his wife, "you'll cheer up now, won't you?"

Mrs. Fielding was disposed to relent, on the strict understanding that Flower was to go, and at once. Claude walked some way with the father through the woods, and found him deeply grateful for his interposition, though heart-broken at the idea of losing his child.

"I don't ask you for the name, sir," he said, "because sometimes, when I think about it, I feel as though I might take this axe," and he brandished the huge weapon he was going to use, "and do the man a mischief. I have my suspicions, sir; but I think I'd rather not know for certain just at present. It would only make matters worse if I did anything desperate."

"You are right, Fielding. Depend upon me for having full justice done, and making

this small villain repent. You may be sure he *is* a small one, from the way he sneaks out of the consequences of his fault."

"Yes, sir," replied the man, baring his brawny arms as he prepared to wield his axe against the trunk of a tree. "I thought he was a small 'un, sir. I feel as though I should like to have him here now, sir;" and he inflicted a gaping wound on the bark of the sapling which was the object of his attentions.

"It's not exactly the thing for a parson to say, Fielding," replied Claude, "but I really feel as though I should like to see him here too. There are certain crimes that make one very much in favour of lynch law. But we must not give way to these feelings, because, as you truly say, it would only make matters worse, and also because our common Master has told us to temper our justice with mercy. But the girl shall have justice, full justice, you may depend on that. Good-day."

When Jones came back, and the inevitable

"explanation" took place, the little one was disposed to take a high tone at first. It was in the editorial sanctum where the interview occurred, and directly the matter was broached, Jones said—

"O that's why you sent for me, is it? Let me tell you, Mr. Vallance, you've nothing to do with this matter. You ain't even parson of Combe Dean now, though if you were I should resent your interference. Don't you think you're going to do the clerical Don Quixote with every Combe Dean drab that——"

"Hold your tongue," said Claude, very quietly, and rising from his seat until he seemed actually to tower over the small cringing creature he confronted.

"Dare to defame that poor child and I'll hurl you down stairs, and let all Sturminster know the reason! I only want you to do justice in this matter. The girl whom you have deserted goes to a Home in London, where, of course, you would be only too glad to leave her dependent on charity. The

demands made on you are modest. They are here," and he tossed him a paper. "Fulfil these, and—for the girl's sake, not yours—I keep quiet. Neglect them, and I will instruct her father what steps to take."

"I shall do what I think right, but at my own time and in my own way," answered Jones, putting the paper in his pocket. "Perhaps I shall patronize this place, perhaps another, but I shan't be dictated to by you."

"In this matter you will."

"In this matter I won't. Hark ye, Mr. Vallance; interfere with me in this affair, or in any affair where it's possible we two may come in collision, and I'll——"

"You'll do what, you contemptible creature?" asked Claude, looking very much as the woodman did at Combe Dean.

"Only mention a little matter I saw take place in Combe Dean church back in the summer. I noted the date," and he read it from his tablets. "The marriage wasn't legal, Mr. Vallance, for it was after twelve

o'clock, and there was only one witness. You wouldn't object to have this mentioned confidentially to Miss Tart, I dare say."

"Mention it to every gossip in the country-side," answered Claude, assuming a calmness he did not quite feel.

"Of course you wouldn't care, but," he added insinuatingly, "would it be quite just to the lady, sir?"

That argument told with Claude Vallance. It seemed to him as though Ada were really dead, and it was simply sacrilege to have her name mentioned by those lips.

Could he only have known that forty-eight hours before the time when they were speaking of her, Jones had been refused by Ada with infinite disgust, and narrowly escaped being kicked off the quay at Boulogne by her father, to whom she had confided his odious proposal!

BROAD CHURCH.

BROAD CHURCH.

A Novel.

BY

DR. MAURICE DAVIES,

AUTHOR OF "PHILIP PATERNOSTER: A TRACTARIAN LOVE STORY,"
"UNORTHODOX LONDON," ETC.

"To yield reasonable satisfaction to the religious sentiment in the emotional nature of man is the problem of problems at the present hour."

PROFESSOR TYNDALE'S Belfast Address.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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BROAD CHURCH.

BOOK II. HYMEN.

CHAPTER I.

OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE, ON WITH THE NEW.



YEAR had almost gone by since the commencement of this story; indeed, had quite passed since Claude Vallance first came as curate to Combe Dean. Things had changed indeed since then. He had kicked considerably over the clerical traces, and instead of being the "regular" curate in charge of a hamlet parish, was the very "irregular" private chaplain to a Radical nobleman against whom the Bishop of Glastonbury would have liked, had he dared, to fulminate his episcopal wrath. He was

moreover the editor of a very advanced provincial paper, and something exceedingly like a political agitator in the interests of Sir Charles Wentworth, who was to contest East Clodshire at the then impending election. A layman pure and simple for six days in the week, he propounded his social—some said his socialistic—theories on Wednesdays at Brabazon Lodge, and on Sundays followed them up with a sermon on the Christian commune. He was an immense favourite with the Sturminster folks, who crowded the ducal chapel in the afternoon, after attending compulsory service under Mr. Denton and Cyprian Gules, or listening to the undisguised Calvinism of Mr. McLachlan, in the morning. Miss Tart and the Dorcas Society had got to admire him as one from whom scandal recoiled harmlessly. Even Squire Atkins restored him to partial favour, and renewed his subscription to the *Clodshire Gazette*. Little Jones had so far forgiven him that he carried out all his stipulations without a

murmur, and never once mentioned the matrimonial episode which had occurred in Combe Dean church. Claude was, moreover, still a resident at Pomona House, and—more than all this—the declared and affianced lover of Clara Thornton.

One dangerous day in the editorial sanctum, Clara was writing at Claude's dictation, and he had got up to revise what she had put on paper, when suddenly as he stooped over the glossy head and fair round shoulder, his dead heart seemed to leap into new life. He stopped short in what he was saying, while Clara turned her head and looked up to ask the cause. She had no need to ask: she read it in his expressive face, and a crimson blush suffused her own.

"Yes, Clara, you have read my secret, have you not?"

"I think I have. *I hope* I have, Claude," she answered, rising as he took her by both those white hands he had become of late so prone to fondle, and drew her unresisting to himself.

"Then, dear Clara, I need scarcely ask, do you return my love? since your words are so literally hopeful."

"You need not; you know you need not. Is it unwomanly, I wonder, to say I have lived for this?"

"It would have been childish for us longer to disguise the truth. Tell me one thing only. How long have you loved me, Clara?"

"Ever since last Twelfth Night, when you made your first appearance at Pomona House. It was love at first sight, and I think you knew it, Claude."

"I think I did."

Then there was a long silence. They were alone in that small sanctum, and amid those piles of musty papers and manuscripts, as much as though they had been in a wilderness. Clara was utterly and purely happy. Her schemes had all been realized; the dream of the last year fulfilled. They finished their task now, with many a lover's interruption; and when at last a less

romantic pause occurred, due to the entrance of George Villars, Claude took the big fist of the brewer in his own, and said—

“Please allow me to salute you by the new title of papa-in-law. Clara and I want to be married on the 6th of January next.”

George Villars gave a great sigh, as if of relief, and said, as he kissed his daughter—

“Hang it! that was just the one thing that was wanting to make me the happiest dog alive. You two folks have been a plaguy time about it, considering that neither of you are chickens. I’ve been waiting for months for this to come about before making my arrangements.”

Everybody seemed to take it as a matter of course. Mrs. Villars knew the dear girl would do better this time. Ethel and Gules had evidently rehearsed their congratulations, and, along with Miles Denton and Emily, looked as though they too had ideas in the direction of Sturminster parish church on the 6th of January then next ensuing.

Oliver Jones, who joined what was ostensibly an impromptu party, but had really been long in anticipation, smiled significantly as he proposed himself for one of the witnesses in advance to Mr. Vallance's marriage—nobody but Claude guessing what he meant; and when Miss Souchong and Miss Tart dropped in as if by accident to tea, the former said a few hearty words of felicitation, but the latter lady could not be content to leave matters so, and whispered snappishly to Claude—

“A much better match than that chit of a Combe Dean girl.”

Ad mortem fidelis! And this was how Claude acted out the adage. When the Old Philosophy, beginning, as Lewes says, with a childlike question, ended with an aged doubt, its scepticism developed on one side into Epicureanism, on the other into Stoicism. Such was the issue of Claude Vallance's love-lore. For him the doubt resolved itself into the pleasant principle that he should eat, drink, be merry, make money,

and love. Faith had died out from his vocabulary, for had not Ada failed him? Faithful to death! There was no such thing as faith. Virtue, vice, honour, fame were fine names; no more. Into the coldest utilitarianism had he drifted; but it was a broad path and a rosy way that his new philosophy decoyed him. He *was* faithful to death, so he argued, for his heart died when she left him lonely and despondent. She knew her absence would kill him, and deliberately struck the blow.

Ad mortem fidelis! A thousand times every day by the wintry waves she read that motto on the ring which girt her wedding finger. Her doubt had developed into stoicism, into the apathy of despair, "the quiet sense of something lost." He had quite forgotten her; he had used her, perhaps, only as a pastime—to beguile the tedium of his Combe Dean life. Letter after letter she had written, until her maidenly pride could let her write no more. He must have received them, for she had even at last

enclosed an envelope addressed to herself, that they might be sent back from the post-office if they miscarried. It was no part of Clara Thornton's purpose to let her know that such was the case. Every shred and fragment that Ada ever wrote to Claude was ruthlessly confiscated and burnt.

Christmas Day was kept in grand style at Brabazon Lodge. The House was up, and it was well known that the dissolution would take place in February. Sir Charles Wentworth must do everything to secure his friends rallying round him; and Pomona House was the key to success. Mrs. Tuft Hunter had all the arrangements for that Christmas banquet placed under her control, and she called the maimed, the halt, and the blind to that great feast. Even Misses Tart and Souchong got invitations to a ducal dinner. The Dorcas Society, as represented by the Misses Evans and mamma, who had no votes, and were not invited, declared it to be an instance of "levelling down;" and the Rev. Mr. McLachlan

agreed that the dispensation was closing in. He lived before the days of the lodger franchise, and was therefore one of the unrepresented as yet. A Reform Bill would, no doubt, have altered his ideas as to the Millennium. Even John Glastonbury came, flanked by the Curates' Aid Society, who were beginning to look coldly on Mr. McLachlan as not such a rising man as they had expected. The fact was, a new metropolitan diocese (as fabulous, by the way, as Glastonbury itself) was being carved out, and the Duke of Brabazon was not so far beyond the hopes of the party in power as to make it impossible he might command the appointment. John trimmed beautifully. By his presence at the Christmas dinner he secured the present interest of the Duke, and the prospective patronage of Sir Charles Wentworth. He propitiated Pomona House, and even atoned for his past error in respect of Claude Vallance by agreeing to officiate at his marriage on the sixth of the following month, at St.

George's, Hanover Square. What wonder that an early number of the *Clodshire Gazette* contained the following announcement:—

“The new Metropolitan see of Babylon is to be filled by the translation of the Right Rev. Dr. John Johnson, Bishop of Glastonbury.”

Soon after the advent of the New Year Claude's aboriginal friend, who had all along been supplying a capital London letter to the *Gazette*, came down to be installed in the editorial chair, which he was to fill during Claude's honeymoon, with a prospect of doing so permanently if certain big projects then crude in George Villars's brain should ripen in the meantime.

Oliver Jones went up to town as avant-courier to see that Portland Place was ready to receive its somewhat numerous guests, for there was more on the tapis than has hitherto appeared on the face of this narra-

tive. All George Villars's ideas had been "big," but this was to be the biggest of all. The office of the *East Clodshire Gazette* presented a curious scene on the eve of the exodus.

"Have you wound up that romantic *feuilleton* of yours yet, Vallance?" asked Wilson, the aboriginal. "Make those village lovers happy before you leave, for hang me if I should know what to do with them; you have got them into such a conglomeration."

"I have made all the wicked people happy, and all the virtuous ones come to unmitigated grief. Such is life. Never end your story with a marriage. We are going to begin *our* story, ain't we, Clara?"

"Please don't talk to me," said Mrs. Thornton, who was in an inky condition. "Mr. Wilson insists upon having my analysis of *Le Follet* before we leave. He will do nothing but politics himself."

"We shall hang about somewhere near London, old fellow," continued Claude,

"and I shall send you some stuff pretty well every day. Clara, too, will find the time hang, no doubt, and furnish you with social matter."

"I dare say. I shan't expect a line from either of you; though if it does come I shall be ready to confess myself for what I have received truly thankful. Miss Tart and Miss Souchong are a perfect mine of wealth for local items. How *do* they know what everybody has for dinner, and how much they pay for their under garments?"

In a few days Sturminster was a "deserted village." George Villars alone remained at Pomona House until the very eve of Twelfth Day. The *Gazette* which came out next morning contained the following items of intelligence, conveyed by "private wire":—

"Married, at St. George's, Hanover Square, by the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Babylon; assisted by the Rev. W. Denton, Rector of Sturminster, Clodshire,

the Rev. Claude Vallance, M.A., Fellow of S. Boniface, —, and Domestic Chaplain to the Duke of Brabazon, to Clara, eldest daughter of George Villars, Esq., Pomona House, Sturminster. Also at the same time, the Rev. Cyprian Gules, Curate of Sturminster, to Ethel, youngest daughter of George Villars, Esq.; and Miles Denton, Esq., B.A., to Emily, second daughter of George Villars, Esq.”

In the same paper Ada Parkinson read in her cheerless little Boulogne salon :—“ The *Clodshire Gazette* will for the future have a London office at —, Fleet Street, with private wire to Sturminster. Mr. Vallance, the Editor, will reside in London, at the house of his father-in-law, Mr. George Villars, Portland Place. Mr. Vallance has accepted a position on the leader staff of a London daily paper.” Among the business intelligence was seen the following :—“ A branch of the Stomachic Ale Brewery was opened shortly after Christmas in Trinity

Street, Borough, S.E., under the management of Mr. Miles Denton ;" while the clerical sayings and doings reported the appointment of the Rev. Cyprian Gules to the curacy with sole charge of Combe Dean, "vice the Rev. W. McLachlan, who comes as curate to Sturminster." "We hear," continued the local oracle, "that Combe Dean is shortly to be constituted a separate benefice."

Ad mortem fidelis. Poor Ada read it over and over again on her ring as the comment on this strange intelligence, and only moved mechanically to obey her father's querulous behest as he called from his little cabinet of a bedroom—

"Bring me my bouillon, Ada, and don't look so miserable over that horrible paper you're reading. Put a little more covering on my feet, child ; either the winters are much more severe here than in England, or else I am beginning to grow older."



CHAPTER II.

LONDON NIGHTS' ENTERTAINMENTS.

THE triple marriage had become a thing of the past; and, with the advancing year, the three honeymoons paled and waned from the little planet whose eccentric orbit is here being tracked. Claude and Clara took up their abode at Portland Place, where the non-resident editor of the *Clodshire Gazette* was to enact the part of a literary pluralist, and, backed by the resources of his wealthy father-in-law, hold court as a kind of journalistic Cræsus. Not only did the project square well with Claude's ambition, but his wife was every inch a queen, and fitted in all ways to hold the sceptre over this literary Lydia. At the same time, Miles settled down to his work in the Borough,

while Emily began a pretty little volume of spasmodic poems, and commenced several novels which ran to about half a dozen manuscript pages, and then collapsed. Their villa at Brixton, however, was a sort of feeble reflection of Portland Place, and Emily was regarded by the ladies of South London as quite a "blue."

Cyprian Gules and Ethel were eking out the fag end of their somewhat protracted holiday in a way quite as characteristic. A college friend was taking Gules's work at two guineas a week, and lodgings: while the ecclesiastical couple were getting *blasé* with their religious dissipation in London. They had exhausted the Ritualistic portion of the metropolis, and were now deep in the mysteries of the Roman Catholic department. At St. Andrew's, Wells Street, they had heard Gounod's *Messe Solennelle* given with its band of harps, and seen Father Walker, at St. Alban's, wield his bâton in the centre of the chancel, while around him re-echoed the sound

of cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music ; and at suburban St. Matthias' Mr. Haines denounced episcopal nepotism parenthetically between the passages of a mass by Schubert. Now the "Pro" was their resting-place. The fashionable Pro-Cathedral at Kensington was familiarly designated by this monosyllable, which might really have been the initial syllable in the word Protestant, seeing that the services were regularly frequented by hosts of advanced young ladies and gentlemen belonging to the Anglican communion, who were fascinated by the suave accents of Monsignor Capel, or attracted by the ascetic visage of Archbishop—since, Cardinal—Manning. St. George's Cathedral numbered them among the most regular of its attendants, and Ethel quite gushed over "dear Dr. Danell," whose magnificent voice thrilled her as he sang mass. Little Gules was as uxorious as most diminutive men are, and could not bear his wife to admire anybody but himself ; whereas

Ethel tantalized him by going desperate for everybody else. But he was supremely happy, however, and got himself up in Roman bands and a clerical wideawake, with coat-tails trailing the very ground he walked upon. He even borrowed a habit of Father Ignatius, and he and his wife were photographed by Walker in the characters of Abelard and Héloïse.

"Cyprian, dear," said Ethel one Sunday morning, in her most winning way, "you used to say you admired the Greek Eucharistic Service. Don't you recollect you talked about going over to the Greek communion once, because it was not a celibate priesthood there? Take me this morning to see the service, will you?"

Ethel's will was law, so far; and straightway they were in a hansom bowling along towards the City, where they mounted to the strangers' gallery in the Greek Church, when they heard Mr. Morphinos sing the office behind his screen, and saw him in gorgeous attire bear forth the silver-bound Gospel for the faithful to kiss.

"Ethel," whispered Cyprian, "I am struck with the surplice of that young acolyte. Take a note of it, and make me one with a blue cross on the back like that. It will look effective in the eastward position for the week-day services at Combe Dean."

Poor rustics! The Combe Dean people were likely to an get eclectic ritual, for Cyprian and Ethel were always picking up something new in the way of vestment or ceremony for the future delectation of their rural flock.

London, though not at this time in the advanced condition of Ritualism which marks our present day and generation, was budding very fairly, and every now and then developing all at once into the full-blown flower without the previous process of blossoming, as 'vert after 'vert, thanks to the kindly offices of Monsignor Capel or Dr. Manning, was "received" and disappeared in *gurgite vasto*. Cyprian at one time seemed hesitating, and certainly was not

held back by any scruples on the part of his wife, who was prepared to make the plunge either in the direction of Rome or the East, should her liege lord take the initiative. She would have joined the Coptic Church or become a female Dancing Dervish on the same conditions. Gules, however, besides feeling some shyness at approaching the Roman authorities, and labouring under the idea that it was necessary to speak Romaic in order to get at an archimandrite, delayed any secession he might have contemplated, satisfying himself for the time being with getting the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, portions of which Ethel and he at once incorporated into their private devotions, and also with buying Neale and Stanley on the Eastern Church, which they bored the Portland Place people to death by reading aloud sometimes of an evening.

"That pot of money of yours, Ethel," Claude used to say, "will be the moral ruin of your husband. The straitened circumstances of a curate kept him true to the

Establishment, but now he is free to think and act for himself I should not in the least be surprised at any change that came over the spirit of his dream. I shouldn't join any of the old shops, though, Gules; they are all more or less effete. Start a new sect. I should do it myself, only Clara here 'hates parsons' so. I can't shake myself quite clear of the old trammels yet."

"I am very glad you can't, Vallance," was Gules's reply. "If we could only get a little orthodoxy into your heretical constitution you would be a useful man in the Church."

"Not if I know it," said Clara, who was rapidly assuming a slang, or at least a free and easy style, in her conversation, as though it formed a part of her rôle as queen of the domestic Bohemians.

"A mixed monastery wouldn't be a bad notion, Gules," added Claude; "something between the Llanthony Abbey and the Bridgwater Agapemone. Abelard and Héloïse in the nineteenth century. Married

monks and nuns, with a crèche for the inevitable results. What do you think of the idea?"

"Really it isn't a bad one, is it?" said Gules to Ethel, after they had retired. "Of course Vallance only meant it in chaff, but there is something in it. I wonder if the married nuns would quarrel very much."

"I really don't see, Cyprian, why the nuns should quarrel any more than the monks. One would think you were talking of the Mormonites."

"No, no, dear. I did not mean to insinuate community of goods to that extent, at all events."

"If the people and the costumes were nice, really a kind of pious club like this might be very pleasant and very useful too."

"We would have a double daily service, with mass at midday, and sermon every evening, as the Oratorians used to do. I don't see why I should not constitute myself head of such an order, just as Ignatius did of the resuscitated Benedictines." And Gules

actually fell asleep while thinking what would be the best title for his new monastic order. If the title of Benedictine had not been already monopolized, that would have suited him admirably, seeing the members were to be benedicts themselves. The scheme of cœnobite couples, so lightly thrown out by Claude, had recommended itself at once to Cyprian Gules; and promised, one of these days, to be an accomplished fact.

Decidedly the most enjoyable aspect of present existence, however, for all with whom our story is concerned, was supplied by what has been termed the domestic Bohemianism of Portland Place. The *vie de Bohême*, as generally understood, involving—as it mostly does—limited resources, and oftenest a bachelor establishment, has some drawbacks in it. This was Bohemianism with lots of money, and a splendid woman to give the tone to it. Mrs. Claude Vallance held a Saturday evening reception, to which the diners at the Aborigines Club generally adjourned in a body, if some of them could

only stay a few minutes. If you did not meet the aristocracy of letters at these receptions, you met what was infinitely more interesting, the rank and file of the literary army in London—men who were doing the hard work in their several departments, and had not yet had time to retire under their laurels. Here was the writer of that sparkling comedy which had taken London by storm; here the walking gentleman, who had immortalized himself and his author by his clever representation of the hero. Yonder man, with the velvet coat and cavalry moustache, had astonished the R.A.'s, and gained a place on the line by sheer merit at the last Exhibition; while the portly performer at the piano is the most rising man in the musical profession. Here is one who is said to be making fabulous sums per week by his trenchant leaders; here the lyric poet of a legion of magazines; here again the graphic "special" of a penny paper. Novelists are present by the dozen, female bards by the score; and here and there a

few lettered parsons, who have timidly fleshed their maiden swords in regions beyond what were considered the orthodox periodicals, are mentally or even mutually making the same comparison as Mrs. Vallance, as to how much more interesting such an assemblage is than any possible meeting of the clergy.

As for that lady she was in the seventh heaven of delight. Her wishes were realized to their full extent. She had married the husband of her choice ; she had weaned him from what she honestly deemed an uncongenial and unfitting profession, and was herself by his instrumentality let behind the scenes of that unknown land she had so often contemplated from a too respectful distance—literary life in London.

Without for one moment overstepping the bounds of propriety—which certainly would *not* have ingratiated her with her present admirers, Mrs. Vallance had every qualification which entitled her to their regards. She was a fine woman, as has been said, and

never did her splendid physique show to greater advantage than when, radiant with health and happiness, she presided over her Saturday evening revels. She talked freely and well, and knew just enough of the avocations of those with whom she conversed to be able to sympathize with them without boring them. The consequence was she always had a knot of men round her wherever she settled herself in the spacious drawing-room, while Emily and Ethel, who were coming on well in her footsteps, had their cliques too; the latter being fluttered around by the literary parsons, who thought Gules the luckiest dog in the world to have got such a nice wife with such exceedingly comfortable surroundings. Even Gules, though he could no more wield a pen than he could a claymore or a tomahawk, caught the contagion too, and talked like a literary veteran in vestries when he was taking duty for overworked Puseyite curates, as he generally did two or three times during every week of his stay in town. Miles Denton

found some good fellows for his confrères in the smoking-room when he took up his abode permanently; and Mr. and Mrs. Villars, who came up to town to set things going, were always present at the receptions, though they had reserved a suite of apartments in case they wanted to be quiet. Nobody did want to be quiet, however, as yet; and even Oliver Jones spent a large portion of his existence in travelling up and down the rail between Sturminster and London, ostensibly for the purpose of getting the branch business into working order; really that he might not lose a chance of meeting Ada, should she or her father reappear upon the stage. He was not quite pleased with the do-nothing policy of Mrs. Vallance on his behalf, and he told her so, or rather, producing his counterpart of the agreement, asked her what was being done to further his interests now she herself had succeeded so splendidly.

“Really I do not think you ought to twit me, Mr. Jones. I put you in train by

sending you to Boulogne, and you do not appear to have followed up your advantage. If the Parkinsons come to London, and you apprise me of it, I will ask them to a reception or to dinner with pleasure."

"No, will you though?" said little Jones; adding mentally, "she *is* a cool card."

The fact was Clara thought no more of Ada's existence now than as though she had never crossed her path at all. In her regards Ada was as dead as she was in those of Claude Vallance.

Ever and anon, as the dead come back in dreams, and old homes live as though they had never been broken up, did the memory of the wee girl he had loved, and the quiet woods where their love had been plighted, come back to Claude amid the feverish life he was now leading. But such flashes were momentary. It was well they should be no more, for the die was irrevocably cast now. Irrevocably? Who dares utter that word in a world so full of changes and chances?

Besides the wide circle covered by Mrs.

Claude Vallance's Saturday receptions, there was a narrower one, still included in but selected from the former, which composed Claude's own special Sunday evening supper party. The Saturday night affair he set down as a sort of witches' Sabbath, an open night for every scribbler on a newspaper, who only on the Jewish seventh day of the week found resting-place for his pen; but the Sunday evening was the calm Christian time for repose, the peaceful vigil of the busy week. Sometimes, sorely against Mrs. Vallance's will, and much to John Babylon's physical derangement, Claude would accept the invitation of some bold Broad Churchman, and give an oration to flocks trembling on the verge of heterodoxy, and bound by the slenderest of ties to the green pastures. After these exertations he needed rest and recuperation, he said, and so it was the Sunday supper parties originated. But they soon enlarged their borders, and became the aftermath of the Saturday. Mrs. Vallance was so very pronounced too in her hatred of

parsons, and John Babylon, whenever he had the opportunity, dropped down so very heavily on the clerical buccaneers who availed themselves of Claude's assistance, that his pulpit exercises became gradually more like angels' visits—few and far between. The Bishop of Babylon had attained the acme of his ambition, and felt independent of the Brabazon interest now, so that he had no need to propitiate Claude; though his connexion with the London press still prevented his lordship from showing his episcopal teeth too plainly. Newspapers have such an awkward habit of letting daylight in upon bishops, that we sometimes feel either one or other of these institutions must be an anachronism in the nineteenth century.

“I am,” said Claude, at one of these esoteric gatherings, “gradually advancing into what my wife considers the most satisfactory state of heathenism; or, if you like to put it the other way round, going back to the condition of the noble savage. When I do

go to church, it is to sit under Mr. Voysey at the shrine of St. George and the Dragon, or Dr. Perfitt at the Free Church in Newman Street; or I am lectured in the Religion of Humanity at the School of the Positivists in Bedford Row. Clara, you've a deal to answer for."

"And I am ready with my response. You are no fitter for a parson than—I am, Claude."

The chosen disciples at Mrs. Vallance's end of the table quite agreed their host and hostess were mutually unfit for the ministry.

"You are wrong, my fine fellows, ruinously wrong," he rejoined. "I cling to the belief that the Establishment has work for men, and that we do wrong to abandon her to John Babylon and his sore-eyed son-in-law. My occupation, it is true, seems gone. When I go to my leader-writing earlier than usual on Sunday morning, and see the people going in droves to church, I cannot but feel what an opportunity is being lost,

how weakly we let John and the tender-eyed one keep the tone of society down. After analysing those congregations who are pouring into every church laden with the cumbrous apparatus of devotion, deducting those who go to show or see bonnets, or simply to relieve the monotony of a purposeless existence, or because it is respectable, I find a margin of men—men, Mrs. Claude Vallance—who are worthy of better things.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Mrs. Claude. “Their very presence there, if voluntary, bespeaks them past redemption—past everything except praying for. Let them pray, by all means, as the parson continually suggests.”

“It were hard to say that they *do* pray. They transact everything in a dabfishy kind of way, their devotion most of all. Excepting where they own the blandishments of acrimonious theology, they have no earnestness or energy at all. They are the very type of men and women for John

Babylon to foist his meaningless platitudes upon."

"To make a solitude and call it peace," suggested a disciple.

"To make them asinine and call them orthodox," was the commentary of Mrs. Vallance.

"That's why I think one ought to stick to the old Church," added Claude. "You won't think me a prig, or that I fancy myself an ornament or pillar of the Church, but I really do think it's a pity for men with two ideas in their heads to drop their hands and let John Babylon and Co. have it all their own way. Even Brother Gules, who is away at Vespers, I suppose, is a fair specimen of a Ritualist, and has at least one idea. If they succeed in driving out the Ritualists and the Broad Church, they will just reproduce the old soporiferous do-nothing days, which would delight John Babylon, because they may possibly last out his time, but they most certainly mean dis-establishment in the long run."

"And a very good thing too," again suggested the disciple.

"And possibly a very good thing too," Claude assented; "I don't want to claim prestige, even as belonging to a dominant sect, and I read the word Catholic in a sense the reverse of that in which every schismatic claims it. But I was ordained a priest."

"Write it large and say presbyter," interpolated the disciple.

"Presbyter, priest, or pastor of the Church of England, and I decline to be unfrocked by John Babylon, unless I know the reason why."

"I approve your pluck," said Mrs. Valance; "but is it worth fighting about?"

"Stick to your pen, old boy, and leave tub-thumping to the ranters."

"But I won't leave tub-thumping to the ranters. I'll thump my tub on the Sunday, as well as wield my goosequill. Why shouldn't I?"

"There's no sort of reason why you

shouldn't open a greengrocery establishment, or embark in the cats'-meat or costermongery, or other light and airy line; only I think it's *infra dig.*, as I've more than once told you," said Mrs. Claude.

"Well, my dear, we must agree to differ on that subject, at all events. Mix us another glass of toddy and send round the cigar-box. I will not allow," he continued, as if determined to have the last word, "that sermon-preaching need be the least more *infra dig.* than leader-writing. *It is* I grant you now, but only because we've let it get into the wrong hands. What would you expect if you put a compositor to write a leader, or sent the office boy out as special correspondent?"

Still, beyond his journalism and occasional magazine work, Claude did not do much in the tub-thumping line. He was watching his opportunity, and so was John Babylon. Twister was kept at work like an amateur detective, to see whether he could not catch the ex-Curate of Sturminster tripping.

"Newspaper writing is utterly heretical and revolutionary, my good Twister, and we won't, if we can help it, have any of your so-called common-sense parsons in Babylon, any more than we had in Glastonbury. By the way, Bridget is to be married out of hand, and I've appointed McLachlan my examining chaplain."

Twister smiled aside, and thought the diocese had one chance the less of being leavened with the objectionable element called common sense.

In due course of events the session opened, the Ministry went out, and a Liberal Government came in. The Duke of Brabazon retired from East Clodshire, and Sir Charles Wentworth came in with a canter. Claude spent most of his existence in the lobby and gallery, doing double duty for the *Gazette* and his London paper. Oliver Jones worked the oracle well at the other end of the private wire, and George Villars threw in the beer along with the ducal interest. All our friends were on the winning side, and when

Gules and Ethel went down after a more than usually protracted honeymoon they found the generally quiet place in the very thick of an electioneering triumph. There had been no contest, it was true, and the free and independent electors found time hang on their hands, so they took the horses out of the carriage which George Villars sent to the station for the young couple, and drew it up themselves to Pomona House, preceded by a distressing brass band and some decrepit flags.

Little Gules accepted the impromptu ovation as an honour done to the Anglican Church rather than himself; and said to Ethel as they went triumphantly, "It only wants a thurible, half a dozen tapers, and some patristic designs on the banners to make the whole thing mediæval and satisfactory."





CHAPTER III.

THE LITTLE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE.

This is a merciful dispensation of Providence which ordains that only the faintest ripple of the quarrels which stir the depths of matrimonial existence appears on the surface, or is visible to society at large. We little know how deeply we are indebted for this immunity to those most natural of all safety-valves, known as curtain-lectures. In these the steam, which has been accumulating all day, and only escaped in spasmodic whistles, is blown off like a hurricane; and Caudle, who, no doubt, richly deserves his fate, gets it very hot and strong indeed.

When Annie pokes down Tom's devoted throat a certain Captain Johnson, whom she knows to be gall and wormwood to the

husband of her bosom, Tom only foregoes his dinner in public, but he "takes on" dreadfully in private; and Annie, as the woman's last resource, cries half the night, and so unfits Tom for next day's duties at the office. She knows the partner of her existence will remember that; but the public is in blissful ignorance, and the head of Tom's department only makes some sly remark about the sun having been shining rather warmly last night, when Tom sneaks in late to business. Or Jane finds in the pocket of Charles's light inexpressibles—left out for repair—a note signed Corydon and addressed to Phyllis, relative to a certain repast which came off at Richmond, on a day when Charles was ostensibly studying at the British Museum. Thereupon a judicial separation is threatened, and Charles detects Jane in the act of taking the razors out of his dressing-case, and parading her suicidal intentions. But society sees and hears nothing of all this, save a little light and airy skirmishing.

Such, if the truth must be told, was beginning to be the state of things between Mr. and Mrs. Claude Vallance on the one subject of debate which at present existed between them. To hear them discuss this matter of clerical duty, one would infer that it was one about which neither felt very strongly. It really seemed scarcely worth fighting about; seemed, indeed, one of those points on which a married couple might reasonably agree to differ. But it went a good deal deeper below the surface than those who heard the little discussions above quoted would for a moment imagine. Mrs. Vallance could not forget that Ada was closely bound up with Claude's clerical experiences. Had she been a mere fanatic, like the Misses Evans, Clara would not have feared such an influence; but she would like to put as dense a barrier as possible between the past and the present state of things. She wanted her husband and his late love to be really dead to one another; and it was this clerical existence which she felt must

die out before she could feel quite certain he had risen to new life with her. Besides this, she assumed the position, as many strong-minded women do, that any proclivity towards priestliness was weak. Hers was a strong animal nature that did not recognise in the clerical office a subtle source of strength, apart from anything that could possibly be called priestcraft. Claude, for instance, used to boast that his leading articles on week-days and his sermons on Sundays were identical; that, as he said, you might have taken the text from his homily and turned it into a leader, or, vice versâ, have put a sentence of Scripture in the forefront of a leading article, and thereby have converted it—literally “converted” the secular study—into a sermon. Clara, on the other hand, used to taunt him with turning the *Clodshire Gazette* into the leading Ecclesiastical Journal of the provinces, and ask whether the leader-staff of the London daily really consisted of a meeting of the parochial clergy. It was her intense

devotion to her husband which made her take this unfortunate stand. Something exceedingly like jealousy, fostered, no doubt, by a guilty knowledge of the way she had gained his love, made her strive to widen the breach between the present and the past, while thorough appreciation of his powers led her, as far as possible, to secularize the use of them. Perhaps her long association with Cyprian Gules, and general acquaintance with the clergy from John Babylon down through the Sturminster Rector to Mr. McLachlan himself did not tend to make her share Claude's clerical ambitions ; and she fell into the exceedingly unhappy mistake of thinking she could carry, by means of ridicule, a point which she failed to enforce by argument.

Now there is nothing which a really masculine nature so thoroughly resents as female "chaff." You may thrash a big mastiff in a way that would set a poodle howling, and he treats you with superb disdain ; but snap your finger-nail in his ear and you send him

into fits of the fidgets. So, too, when Mrs. Vallance had been more than usually emphatic one Sunday evening in her denunciations of the cloth during supper, and continued her objurgations when they were alone, Claude ventured to remind her that a contentious woman was like a perpetual dropping. Thereupon he was compared by her to a walking Cruden's Concordance, and begged not to fall into the mistake of quoting texts. He had done so to a greater extent than he was perhaps aware in his recent leaders, and his magazine stories were really quite of the goody-goody order.

Thereupon Claude, as his custom was, became silent, and lighting his study lamp sat down and wrote resignedly until such time as his wife should think fit to retire, laying down his pen with the attitude of a martyr when she ventured to suggest it was getting late, and advising her by no means to stop up after it was quite agreeable to her.

These interesting little episodes had become disagreeably frequent before the first twelve months of married existence had nearly sped to their close. The only noticeable result was that Claude Vallance clung more closely than before to the House of Commons, and sat later at the Aborigines' Club after. Those who judged only by an inspection of the surface thought it a remarkable thing that Claude should prefer the society of roystering scribblers to that of his splendid and accomplished wife; but others, and these the experienced married men, held their peace and spake nothing except in a sotto voce opinion that there was something rotten in the state of things at Portland Place.

When the inevitable result came too which constituted Claude a paterfamilias, and invested Mrs. Villars with the coveted dignity of grandmamma, the breach was widened instead of being, as is often the case, bridged over by baby-bands. At the first interview between husband and wife

after the domestic event, when Claude was marshalled mysteriously into the sanctum sanctorum and shown his son and heir, Clara, giving him her white hand, said—

“O Claude, that it should come to this. I always dreaded an atmosphere of Maw’s Feeding Bottles and monthly nurses.”

The latter functionary was present, and immediately gave it as her private opinion to the next domestic with whom she came in contact, that Mrs. Vallance was “no woman.”

Clara had always pronounced in favour of the French system of boarding out little strangers until they became of age to go to school.

“You know I’m not the person to set a good example to children and domestics,” she used to say. “I have no Malthusian views on the subject, but I honestly believe that a crèche on a superior scale would be a very useful institution. The State ought to charge itself with the care of its rising

citizens ; but if the State doesn't see its duties in that light, private enterprise should step in and prevent progressive mammas from inoculating their offspring with precocious ideas."

"Clara, my dear, how you do talk," had been Mrs. Villars's mild reproof what time she waited for her new dignity to descend upon her.

"Only stop till the arrival takes place," said George Villars, "and we shall have the interesting juvenile thrust down all our throats."

Mr. Villars was not possessed of the gift of prophecy in this respect, at all events. Baby decidedly made matters worse between Claude and his wife; and when some six weeks after its appearance on this stage of existence, it showed signs of retiring once more, as if it felt itself in the way, the father's and mother's positions seemed reversed. Claude sat for hours with old Mrs. Villars, watching the marble face and faint breathing of the poor little sufferer. His was

the voice to catechize the medical man as to the chances of survival when that functionary came and gazed on the curious problem before him, but, not having the slightest idea what was the matter, covered his ignorance with pompous phraseology or oracular speech which could be construed either way according to the event.

"I can't bear to stand by, mamma, and see the poor little thing suffer while I feel so helpless to relieve it." Such was the attitude Clara felt it best to assume. "Come away, Claude. Leave the poor little one to mamma and nurse. You will make yourself ill and unfit for work if you break your rest so."

But Claude remained, and his tacitly doing so was the strongest possible protest against Clara's conduct. He never taxed her with being unwomanly. He tried hard not to show that he thought her so. He simply, as his custom was, retired within himself, and left things to take their course. He had, as we have seen, an old habit of

drifting. He simply sat a little longer over his leaders, and polished them more carefully; lingered a little later in the lobby or the gallery, and smoked an extra cigar or pipe at the Aborigines'. It was just a quiet way he had of adapting himself to circumstances.

So the end came, and they all stood there to note the precise moment when the faint breath ceased and the little eyes which had opened and shut wearily for days and nights closed altogether, and the poor wan hands unclasped the tiny knots in which they had been gathered as if from agony, and now lay listless by the side. Claude looked in vain for a tear in Clara's eye, though all around were weeping as if in consciousness of their own impotence to do aught else.

"There is another angel in Heaven," said the poor nurse, in what was perhaps the stereotyped phraseology of her craft on such occasions, but it was a man's, not a woman's—not a mother's—voice that endorsed the

idea. It was only when Clara had suffered herself to be led away from the little bedside that Claude knelt down with the women and prayed God, in the beautiful words of the office for a sick child, "to receive him into those heavenly habitations where the souls of them that sleep in the Lord Jesus enjoy perpetual rest and felicity." It was weak, perhaps ; it was certainly unorthodox, unless Claude altered that prayer as Dr. Johnson used to do, and ask that Heaven "might have received" the child ; but the prayer came spontaneously to his lips, and he had no time or inclination to distinguish between present and past tenses. Happily, if there were any irregularity in his supplication, John Babylon was not by to inhibit him or tell Mr. Twister to make a note of it in his Black Book for the diocese.

Later on, too, when Claude sat alone by the little grey coffin, and lifting the lid looked down upon the tiny face that peered up so strangely, faded away like the flowers clasped in those rigid hands, he could not

help thinking what might have been had the child lived and grown up ; how in him he might have lived his own life over again happily and unselfishly. He did not murmur or rebel. As it was he was inclined to agree with Clara's tacit but unquestionable opinion that things had turned out for the best, yet still he thought he would have liked to hear his own name lisped by those little lips now closed mysteriously for ever, and to fondle the baby fingers which were so rigid and cold when he felt them. He pictured himself taking his boy out with him into the streets and parks, just as once he pictured himself walking with Ada in the Combe Dean woods.

Ah ! and that was another aspect of what might have been. Had yon little one owned another mother, it would have been something to stand with Ada hand in hand—as then he felt they would have stood—to gaze upon the wreck of their hopes. Now he stood or sat or knelt alone. Who could analyse the source of the tear which rested

on the little cheek as Claude kissed it for the last time, and with a broken "good-bye" left them to do their office of shutting it out for ever from his sight?

"Come away, Claude; come to Clara," said the poor disappointed grandmamma. "I don't like to see you thus" (but she did like to see it, nevertheless), and she led him gently from the room which had only for so short a time been dignified with the title of nursery. The nursling had bloomed in Paradise. It was cradled with the angels. Mrs. Claude Vallance's atmosphere of Maw's Feeding Bottles was cleared: the nurse's occupation gone; the prospective necessity for crèche and school was at an end.

Years afterwards Clara looked back to this time, and seemed to know that then the Recording Angel had been bidden "write this woman childless."

Later again, when he stood by the little grave in the cemetery, and heard the chaplain return thanks in the usual perfunctory manner to Heaven for having delivered his

brother out of the miseries of this sinful world, the old motto seemed to surge up to his lips again with a new meaning. "Faithful to death" seemed to point at fidelity to his dead child. What else had he to be faithful to now? What else? How dared he ask that question? Was there not his wife? Strange it was how familiar that little wasted face of the departed child had grown in those few weeks. He thought of that. That came unbidden to his mind's eye. He even thought of another face almost as childlike, perhaps almost as wasted now, which once looked childishly up to his in the brave old woods, or wonderingly as he read the strange words in the hamlet church. He thought about being faithful to these; he even vowed greater fidelity than ever to his work, but he never thought of faithfulness to that child's mother and—his wife.

Later and later still, when he stole from town and gave orders for a tiny marble cross to stand at the head of that grave, or from time to time hung shilling wreaths

of immortelles upon it, he still rejoiced to think that he at least had found a meaning for the old troth, "faithful to death." What had she done, what was she doing, who had broken that troth with him so strangely, as it seemed so wantonly?

What was she doing? Why, out there upon the Boulogne sands, while Claude was weeping at his dead child's tomb, she was reading the motto on the bloodstone once again, and feeling that, however he may have forgotten the vow and covenant betwixt them made, of which that ring given and received was token and pledge, she had never wavered or swerved from it. Fortune had not smiled on them of late; and she and her father had been called upon to fight that weariest of all battles, the battle with poverty and feeble health. Whatever the nature of the old man's avocations, they had not thriven of late. Ada and he had not been in absolute want, but their circumstances were much more straitened than of old, and they were going, in the very

spirit of Dick Whittington, to beat a retreat upon London, as though they were certain there to find the gold-paved streets. It was their last walk upon what had now become the familiar beach, and the Captain seeing her gaze for the hundredth time upon the ring, could not help saying—

“Any one would think, 'child, that you wore an amulet upon your finger, instead of what I suspect is the gage d'amour of a more than usually faithless lover. I saved you from that fate, however. You didn't marry a curate.”

“No ; and I did not exactly marry money either, did I papa?” said Ada with a faint wintry smile.

“Never too late to mend, my dear. No, you did not marry money, and Mr. Vallance did. He played his cards uncommonly well, considering he always gave himself out as such a very uncommercial traveller along life's highway. I always suspect those parsons who pretend to be so very unworldly.”

“But Mr. Vallance was scarcely a hypo-

crite," answered Ada, surprised to find herself becoming Claude's apologist, for his name was generally avoided between them.

"Not in the snivelling sense of the word, no; but he did marry that brewer's daughter uncommonly soon after his escapade with you, and preventing the match I had planned with Atkins. That would have made us, Ada."

"It might have made you, you very selfish old Jephthah; but what of poor Jephthah's daughter?"

"You would have accommodated yourself to the horsey squire as readily as Vallance to the big brewer's daughter. There is a deal of romance wasted about this marriage contract, which after all is as plain a piece of business as a lease or a will."

About that contract, signed, sealed, and delivered in the vestry of St. George's, Hanover Square, yes. Ada could well believe that, but not about the silent contract witnessed, as she thought, only by

Heaven, which had bound them one to the other in the church at Combe Dean. She clung more closely than ever to her sacramental theory of that vow. It was her one source of comfort now. Come what might she was his by prior right, and he was hers. Nothing could undo that. He had voluntarily and consciously then and there performed a sacramental act, which bound them each to other for time and for eternity; for eternity certainly, if not for time. But she had a faith which never flagged or failed her that it was for time too; that whatever was the mystery which separated them, however he had drifted away from her (she used the word which she felt he would have used), they would still come together in time. True, she knew well enough that what was but a single crucial event in her life—that strange sacramental marriage—might have been but one of a series in his. He might have been a very Mormonite in spiritual marriages, but she did not think so. Apart from the wish

being father of the thought, she did not believe this. Did any curious rapport exist between these two in virtue of their strange love-bond? They had been cut off as completely as by death from each other, and yet, one consciously, the other unconsciously, they had remained true to that motto, "*Ad mortem fidelis.*" He realized it there beside his dead child's grave in the cemetery. She, sitting with her father by the margin of the sea she was soon to cross and come nearer the centre to which all her thoughts gravitated, was asking herself the old question, "Is he happy? Can he be happy?"

No, Ada, he is not happy. Slowly but surely the conviction is stealing in upon him that he has made a fatal mistake. It is irrevocable, and he will adapt himself to circumstances. He will not, as far as he can help it, let a single wandering thought shape itself into a deliberate wish that what might have been may still be. But he is waking to the knowledge that the deed done that summer morning in the hamlet church was

registered in Heaven though never chronicled on earth.

No, he is not happy, but he is exceedingly resigned. Things might have been much worse. He is rich; he has congenial work. His wife is admired on all hands, and only errs, or mostly errs where she does err, out of devotion to him. He will adapt himself to circumstances which he quite sees were of his own seeking. A very philosophical resolve, no doubt, but one which was not very promising in the way of connubial felicity. All men still spoke well of him, with the single exception, perhaps, of John Babylon; yet of Claude it might be said, had not Mr. Toole lent a low comedy meaning to the assertion which it will take a generation at least to lose, that still he was not happy.





CHAPTER IV.

THE SCHOOL OF THE SCEPTICS.

THE little rift within the lute widened slowly, but perhaps on that account more surely. Claude's attraction towards sacerdotalism, as Clara chose to call it, was intermittent, sometimes appearing to be entirely in abeyance; and at such times the current of their blended lives flowed equably in the fair wide flowery channel carved out for it by fate. Why could it not be always thus? Why could he not always bask in the sunshine of those delicious eyes? Often in their hours of passion, for they had not yet outgrown these quite, Claude would ask himself that question—why should passion spend itself and fall back enervated into satiety? With that satiety came the old ambition to act the priest, or, as Claude

phrased it, to infuse into the apparently effete system of the Church of England some at least of that enthusiasm of humanity which belonged to it when men were chosen for the priesthood because they were born for it, because they owned the natural qualifications for spiritual supremacy over their fellow men, just as others were a people's teachers because they excelled in intellect, or its warriors because their thews and sinews were of iron. Call it magnetic, or what you will, this power of swaying men's souls, of seeing into futurity, and speaking with that power which was once called prophecy, and now was only named preaching, it was quite clear that some had it and some had it not. Claude felt, rightly or wrongly, that he possessed the gift—what else meant his ordination-call?—and was not inclined to let it rust.

They often went to the little Positivist School in Chapel Street together, where the great dead of different ages—Homer, Pythagoras, Voltaire—surrounded them in

effigy instead of the saints which stared grotesquely from their niches or painted windows in a Roman Catholic cathedral. Clara quite agreed with the teaching she imbibed at the shrine of Comte, that there had been a theological age of the race just as there had been an infantile and childish period in the life of the individual. But that period was past ; and to go back to theology was like the full-grown man or woman amusing themselves with the sports of childhood.

She had even a more persuasive argument and an older precedent still. When philosophy, beginning, as was said, with that child-like question, ended with that aged doubt, what did men do? They accepted that doubt, and formulated Scepticism. They split up, according to their idiosyncrasies, into the opposed schools of the Stoics and the Epicureans. Did not history always repeat itself? What was that which was now called Positivism but a recurrence to the tangible in place of the visionary?

Comte—it was true—developed into a priest and elaborated an ornate religion; but that, said some of his disciples, was Comte mad as opposed to Comte sane. There is the disingenuousness of those who will divide the author of the *Positive Philosophy* from the writer of the *Catechism*. Have not the Utilitarians lately done the same with John Stuart Mill, drawing the line sharply between the author of *Liberty* or the writer of the *Autobiography* and the *Essay on Theism*?

“The Philosophy of the Garden be ours, Claude,” she exclaimed with more than her old enthusiasm one night, when, having returned from the Clapham Theatre, where the production of Claude’s comedy was imminent, they had supped alone, and seemed to be the Claude Vallance and Clara Thornton of former days, and not the sober married couple into which they ought to have settled down by this time. She held her broad champagne glass Bacchante-wise to her mouth, and as the sparkling wine

bubbled around her rich full lips she toasted as by inspiration the Garden of Epicurus and the Philosophy of Pleasure.

They were certainly a pair who might have represented the race in that second Eden. Claude, with his gigantic frame, never looked to such advantage as when in evening dress as she had first seen him in Sturminster. He was a shade stouter than then, and his open waistcoat displayed his broad chest to advantage. His short crisp hair curled as of old, and the thick moustache took off any possible effeminacy one might have chosen to detect in his closely-shaven face. Clara, too, was infinitely improved in matronly beauty since her second marriage. She was dressed to perfection, and, as Englishwomen so seldom array themselves, in plain rich black. The body of her dress, which erred neither on the side of excess nor defect, displayed just enough of the white bust to lend a new emphasis to her toast; and the soft white hands, from which every symptom of a ring save the

plain gold wedding circlet had long since disappeared in deference to Claude's wishes, twined softly round her husband's neck when he had duly honoured her toast as she kissed him in illustration of the Epicureanism she recommended.

How strange it seemed to him then that they could ever quarrel. How ready he was to put from him all ideas of sacerdotalism, and say, with the broadest of Broad Churchmen, "Hang theology!" It was the old legend of the Siren and Ulysses over again; only here the Siren and Penelope were one and the same. But the fit passed. Once more the inner call became perceptible, and Claude could not, or would not, see that his vocation was destructive of the Philosophy of the Garden. Asceticism was no necessary adjunct of a system that had produced a St. Theresa, an Abelard and Héloïse, and a Madame Guyon. It was but a relic of Puritanism that foisted a grim morality and a sour theology on the National Church. He claimed Anglicanism as

the religion of a gentleman as well as of the thinker and the mystic.

"It is a thankless office, Claude, that of Julian the Apostate, trying to infuse the new spirit into the old mythology," argued Clara.

"I remember the leader of the Old Wine and the New Bottles; but——"

"But you don't believe leaders now, any more than I do sermons?"

"No; we have both been too much behind the scenes since then."

It occurred to the fertile brain of Mrs. Claude Vallance that it would be a great thing if she could make her husband jealous. Then perhaps he might value her more, and surrender himself entirely to her philosophy. With this lady, to think of a scheme was at once to set about organizing it; and other people were like the pawns which she used to play minor parts in her curious game of chess. In her complicated plan for gaining her husband originally, she had used Oliver Jones as her catspaw. Now

she descended to another not altogether dissimilar machinery.

Squire Atkins found himself in a minority of one in Sturminster; for as Mr. Denton and Mr. McLachlan were clergymen, and the Dorcas Society ladies, they did not count in political matters. The *East Clodshire Gazette*, ably conducted by Wilson, and kept posted up to the very latest moment by Claude and Mr. Thornton, was still triumphant. Sir Charles Wentworth proved a model member, and, after indulging in a few rather questionable escapades in the way of advanced Radicalism—as if to prove his power—settled down into a thorough working Liberal. George Villars divided his time fairly between his brewery and his newspaper office; and Pomona House was in close alliance with Brabazon Lodge. What was a bucolic and Conservative Squire to do, under the circumstances? He had not the moral courage to turn right about, as many other free and independent electors had done, swayed by interest or conviction.

"You see, sir," he said to Mr. Denton, as he paced the High Street one evening with the Rector, "we move in rather a narrow circle here. We are apt to get left high and dry by the advancing tide of knowledge," he added, varying the metaphor.

"Well, I don't know ; it's all very well for you bachelors, and young Benedicts like Miles, to say so. I am an old foggy, and as long as you let me farm my glebe in peace, I don't care much about new ideas."

"But this quiet revolution that has gone on here seems to have turned everything topsy-turvy."

"It has ; and I believe you are going now."

"Going? In one sense, I am. I have made up my mind to have a little spell in London."

"Nothing like it, sir, for enlarging the ideas."

"Exactly my notion. I mean to try it, at all events. I shall call on Miles,

of course. What about Portland Place? Do you think Vallance will object to see me?"

"Not the least in the world. I believe he is sincerely grateful to you and everybody that got him out of the clerical groove at Sturminster. But I say, Atkins, don't you be flirting with Mrs. Claude. We all recollect your old affection in that quarter. What will the Misses Evans say to your dancing attendance in Portland Place?"

The bucolic Squire blushed like a girl; and if he had told the truth, he would have confessed that a sight of Mrs. Claude was among the items of enlargement which he coveted for his ideas.

He did call; and, in due course, received his invitation for the next Saturday evening's reception, at which he presented himself in a dress-coat of antediluvian build, a chef-d'œuvre of Sturminster art, but about as much behind the age of the other costumes which surrounded the Squire as his own notions were in comparison with

the new light let in upon his ancestral Clodshire. He was the very man for Mrs. Claude's purpose. She shuddered at the integuments, but resolved to utilize the individual.

"Now, Mr. Atkins," she said, looking at him in her most fascinating way, "you must come and sit by me all the evening, and tell me all the news of my native village. These noble Aborigines will, I am sure, make room for you. They have left their tomahawks at home, washed off their war-paint, and are warranted quite harmless."

The Aborigines greeted him warmly, for Mrs. Vallance's sake ; very differently from what a group of dandies would have done. Before he had been in the magic circle a quarter of an hour, he was engaged for the next month at the Saturday dinners of the hospitable autochthones.

But it was on the charming woman who formed the centre of that merry group he felt his gaze spellbound. He was so over-

head-and-ears in love, that the trifling fact of her being already married seemed quite to escape his recollection, and he fell into her plans as easily as a big bluebottle flounders into the web spread for him by a clever spider. Bitterly he regretted the loss of that splendid opportunity which he had let go by one Twelfth Night at Pomona House, an opportunity never to return. How seldom, by the way, opportunities once let slip do return to us! Why should Fate open her cornucopia for us a second time, when once we have scorned her golden treasures? He would not have lost such an occasion now, though the whole Dorcas Society, marshalled by Miss Tart herself, were arrayed against him instead of a group of friendly Aborigines, playing into his hands by talking rapidly with one another on topics which he did not in the least comprehend, and leaving him to the free enjoyment of Mrs. Vallance's most sweet society.

"Do you remember that evening when

we discussed matrimonial theories at Pomona House, Mr. Atkins?"

Remember it! Could he ever forget it? And he really looked as romantic as the extraordinary cut of his coat collar would allow.

"That was the first time I saw my husband, was it not? Ah, how times have changed! Who could have guessed the present state of things then?"

"Who indeed? We all thought the little Combe Dean lady was the favoured one, did we not?"

"Have you ever settled the question I started then, whether happiness were likely to result from dissimilarity, rather than from identity of dispositions and tastes, and whether it was possible for two people to be too much alike?"

"*'In contrasts lieth love's delight,'*" simpered Atkins, with his hand on his heart in the approved Sir Charles Grandison style, and with a faint idea that he was quoting poetry. "I certainly do not think it is well

for folks to be too much alike." He was determined to do or die now, and did not care in the least whether Claude heard him or not. His host did, as a fact, come up almost before he had finished his sentence ; and, after a hearty shake of the hand, said—

"What, Mrs. Vallance has got you in hand, has she, Squire? Take care she does not ruin your religious principles as I once very nearly did, you know. She is worse than I was then a deal. Still we are very much alike, after all."

This remark tallied so strangely with what they were talking about, that Atkins felt certain Claude had heard him. Clara only noticed the remark by a most significant glance at the stricken Squire, which Claude in due course saw, as it was intended he should see it. But then he knew it was so intended, and guessed why. Mrs. Vallance wanted to make him jealous, but he had not a particle of the Othello in his composition ; and had he possessed that ingredient, the

heavy Squire was scarcely the sort of Cassio to make him uneasy. He was really sorry that Clara should think it necessary to waste her sweetness on such very small deer.

"I recognise your pen very often—though not so often as of old—in *Gazette* articles, and at once attributed some of the finer passages of 'Love in a Village' to you."

"Ah, yes," sighed Mrs. Vallance with great unction. "I broached the too-much-alike idea there, I know. Did it recall our conversation to you when you read it?"

"Did it not?"

The Squire was waxing so very demonstrative that the Aborigines felt in the way, and sheered off; and he monopolized Mrs. Vallance so completely that other people could scarcely get a word. In fact, he overacted his part, and made Clara more ashamed than she otherwise might have been of the very questionable machinery she was using.

Was it a piece of retributive justice, the faint beginning of a life-time of penance for

the devices to which she had stooped in order to gain Claude's love? Was it a new illustration that one deviation from rectitude ever entails another as a necessity? It were difficult to draw the moral as yet; and Claude, who knew nothing of the previous error, was really pained to see the mistake his wife was making now. He was inclined, in fact, to censure his own wavering affection, or rather intermittent demonstrations of affection, as the cause of this singular exhibition. Had Atkins been an elderly relative from whom the Vallances had expectations they could not have made more fuss with him. Clara played him off against Claude, and Claude was determined to show he did not care about it. He begged the Squire to take his wife down to the buffet in the dining-room, and also to name an early day when he would give him the pleasure of his company at a family dinner.

"I may have to run off, you know, Mr. Atkins, for a leader-writer is as little master

of his time as a country apothecary ; but Mrs. Vallance is used to play the host on such occasions, and I am sure you will excuse me."

Of course it happened that when the Squire came Claude *was* called away ; he took care that such should be the case. He was determined to show his wife that she was burdening herself with an unnecessary lover. Irksome indeed was the task to poor Clara, for she detested the Squire in reality, and would have preferred an hour's tête-à-tête with her husband to any other possible society. How strange it was that a sensible woman could so far forget herself, or think to tell upon a man like Claude by such a transparent device. The worst—or nearly the worst—of all was, that she got unmercifully roasted by the select disciples at the Sunday evening suppers. They were set on by that incorrigible Claude, who insisted on asking whether they had ever been to see "A Phenomenon in a Smock Frock," what were the ruling prices of "turmits," and

whether the mangold-wurzels were looking up at the markets.

“Why didn’t you ask our Clodshire friend here to-night, Clara?” he said. “He would have been an authority on these matters.”

Though not a word was spoken or a hint given, Clara saw that her husband had penetrated her strategy; and the discovery made her feel contemptible indeed. Poor Mr. Atkins had to adopt other methods of enlarging his ideas, for Mrs. Vallance was persistently out if he called; and when Claude suggested that he should be asked to dinner again, his wife begged so earnestly he might not, that he really had not the heart to urge it any further. He had quite cured Clara of that little mistake, and could afford to be generous.

A compromise was naturally enough effected between Claude and Clara in favour of the Positivist School above mentioned, who combined the sacred and secular so far as to form for a time neutral ground for the pair; and they were for a long time among

the most devout of Comte's followers in London. But this pleasant arrangement was broken through by Claude coming home one day and announcing that he had stood for a Sunday lectureship, and obtained it.

"Who were your electors?" asked Clara, with undisguised contempt. "Had you to propitiate the incumbent and curates?"

"The incumbent is the leading Broad Churchman in Babylon, and I was elected not by him, but by the vestry."

"By the vestry! Claude, don't tell me you canvassed the butchers, bakers, and candlestick-makers of a suburban parish!"

"I canvassed nobody, Clara. I sent in my application; I was elected, and shall accept the post. I think you may leave me to take care of our dignity."

"I am not so sure of that, Claude. Really I am not so sure of that. We have all of us some weak point or other, of the existence of which we are, of course, blissfully unconscious. Yours is certainly a

lingering belief in that venerable old Establishment. It's sweetly romantic, but really unworthy of you—trust a woman's judgment for once."

"No, Clara: in this respect the wilful man must have his way. There is only one chance for you."

"What is that?"

"John Babylon may refuse to license me."

"John Babylon will—John Babylon shall refuse to license you," she exclaimed, gleefully. "I'll write to John Babylon myself to-night, and remind him of all your irregular antecedents." And Mrs. Claude Vallance was as good as her word too, though of course she meant her husband to receive her words as mere bravado. She wrote anonymously to Babylon House, reminding him of the Rev. Claude Vallance's irregularities in doctrine and practice. It was a remarkable piece of strategy; but what was much more remarkable was that John Babylon, not having learnt wisdom by pre-

vious experience, again told the now remonstrant Twister to refuse the licence simply, and add no reason.

"Let him come and get his reason *viva voce*, if he wants it," said John Babylon, who had now arrived at the acme of his episcopal ambition, and cared not what public or private opinion said about him.

"I hope you feel sufficiently small, my dear," observed Clara, when Claude had handed her the letter to read.

"On the contrary, I feel — and look — larger than ever, and so bold!"

And he unrolled a large poster, many-coloured as the coat of Joseph, announcing that he would deliver a lecture on the succeeding Sunday at a suburban hall, taking for his subject, "Bishops and Curates." A performance of sacred music would precede and follow the lecture; but a footnote explained that, "according to the present law any religious service performed by a clergyman of the Church of England would be illegal."

"That will do, I think, Clara?"

"Excellently well. So you anticipated John Babylon's refusal?"

"Voilà the poster. I wanted a grievance to justify my breaking new ground. I think this will stir up the elements a little."

At the Aborigines' dinner and the subsequent reception that evening, Claude's project was spoken of as a pious music-hall; and the Aborigines resolved to attend in a body. The title assumed by this new Babylonian institution was the School of the Sceptics, meaning by that dubious term—as its announcements specified—simply the School of the Inquirers.





CHAPTER V.

THE THEATRE ROYAL, CLAPHAM.

AFTER innumerable delays, which the suave and persuasive manager begged the author to believe arose solely from the surpassing merit of the work, Claude's piece was to be produced at the Theatre Royal, Clapham—a house as little known to the ordinary playgoer perhaps as the sees of Glastonbury and Babylon to the common ecclesiologist, or Sturminster and Clodshire themselves to the topographical student. Claude Vallance had a theory, which still further increased the sulphurous odour of his name in the nostrils of the orthodox, that the stage was not only a legitimate method of amusement, but a vast vehicle of education. "With a well-regulated stage," he said, "by which I do not

at all mean a stage devoted to the representation of Hannah More's Sacred Dramas, you may do as much good as with your churches and schools. I won't say that you may do more good, because I don't see why you should introduce any comparison at all; though there is this remarkable difference, that while you have to force people into church and school they will pay to come to the theatre. When you have once got them there, it is your fault if you don't give them what shall be a means of intellectual culture as well as a light and fascinating relaxation. And when I speak too of a well-regulated stage, I do not mean a stage utterly different from what it is at present. I am not like the old gentleman in the pit, 'praising every time, save times like these,' who thinks dramatic art died with Kemble or Liston. I think the stage is well regulated. It is simply a case of supply answering demand. There was a time when five-act tragedies were wanted; now we want burlesque, opera-bouffe, and Robertson's comedies.

Make your burlesque, opera-bouffe, and comedies respectively as good as you can, and the effect of the stage may be as beneficial as that of George Eliot's or Charles Kingsley's novels."

The orthodox Claphamites would hear him up to this point, and then leave, unable to bear his heresy further. Five-act comedies and George Eliot's novels to supersede the pulpit and Bible! That was the way the Clapham goodies had of putting it. In fact, the words just quoted were from one of Claude's pious music-hall lectures, which were garbled in the next issue of the *Broken Reed*, and their author denounced as the Man of Sin. Everybody is the Man of Sin in turn, from poor Pius IX. and Napoleon III. down to our present hero, if they happen to come into collision with the *Broken Reed* or its supporters.

Like most aspirants to dramatic fame, Claude Vallance believed he had discovered a new walk in his art, quite a novel office for the instrumentality he was using.

He would sit down with the deliberate purpose not only of making his drama teach a great moral lesson, which all worthy playwrights probably do, but of making it enforce something which all but Clapham and its *Broken Reed* should confess to be a directly religious duty. Taken apart from his so-called religious but really sectarian aspect, the average man was, Claude argued, a decently charitable sort of fellow. Once let him join what is misnamed the religious world—let him be, in the vulgar sense of a most beautiful word, “converted”—let him become, what surely we all ought to become, “a saint;” and you not only lower his tone individually, but fill him full of acrimony and the spirit of persecution against all who differ from him—the more slightly they differ the more virulent his persecution of them. He appealed to facts to prove that this position was no theoretical one, and his doctrine was that you could best overcome such a wrong bias by going violently for the time into the opposite extreme and

thoroughly securing the recoil, when you could relax a little, and the crooked would become straight. Secularize all methods of education. Not only revoke the old crabbed Puritan objection against playhouses, but make your theatre what it was in the days of the ancient Greeks, and then you may hope to revive something like the intellectual condition of Athens in the age of Pericles. But this may be done without dwarfing the popular faith to the dimensions it then assumed. In a word, the drama might teach moral and spiritual truths as well as intellectual and social ones quite as easily now as it did in the days of the mysteries or miracle-plays. There must not, of course, be the slightest inkling or intimation that such spiritual truth was being conveyed, or the gods would suspect the gilded pill and secede at once. There lay the dramatist's art—the art of concealing art.

Claude's comedy, then, was named "Conversion," and was really based on Horace's first satire, with a difference, setting forth

not only how ready people were to change their own condition, but what an assistance was given to these weak-minded folks by a corps of propagandists in every walk of life, who believed they had ultimated truth themselves, and had nothing else to do but bring the world round to their way of thinking, when the millennium would supervene as a matter of course. The comedy was avowedly written by a Church of England clergyman, and the dramatis personæ embraced some characters drawn with almost Aristophanic closeness from existing models. There was a Monsignor Catesby, though not, of course, so named; who sought, as the end and aim of his existence, to make a 'vert of the hero—a Lothair in his way. A Spurgeonite before Spurgeonism assailed the kitchen, and held a sort of religious "High Life Below Stairs," while a zealous spirit-rapper discovered that the heroine was a medium; the result of all these combined influences being that the forces neutralized one another, and the hero

and heroine pursued the somewhat uneven tenor of their way through a pretty subsidiary love-plot, declining to be converted to the staple comedy-creed of obedience to father and mother in the matter of matrimony, and ending in the approved fashion by doing what was right in their own eyes.

No doubt the author overrated the originality of his piece just as mammas think there never was such a baby as their own: this is a delightful provision of nature, to prevent one being utterly disgusted with our own productions. In a neighbourhood like Clapham, however, where the air was overcharged with clerical influences, the very posters were attractive, for the list of characters looked like one of the local clerical meetings; and the whole bill resembled those religious advertisements which Spurgeon only sublimated to their highest point, but did not originally invent.

On the night when Claude's *magnum opus* was to be played for the first time, a

very good house indeed awaited the representation, and assembled to make or mar the fortunes of the dramatist accordingly as he might deserve. It was rumoured that the reporter of the *Broken Reed* strained a point to be present, with the idea of fulminating a fiery article against the play if there was anything to take hold of; but the rest of the journalistic world was so largely represented, and spoke so favourably of what many of the critics had come prepared to condemn, that the religious journal was wise in its generation, and contented itself with a pious wail over the generally horrible fact that a clergyman should write for the stage at all.

Claude and Clara occupied places quite on one side of the house. Miles Denton and Emily joined them, and there was a *levée* held all the evening in Mrs. Vallance's box. The Aborigines mustered largely, and strove to support Claude under his ordeal, though there was not much need; he was perfectly calm, "equal to

either fortune," as he said, and from the first the play promised success.

"Which do you feel the most funky occasion, Vallance?" asked a nervous dramatic author, "this, or preaching your first sermon?"

"Well this, in a measure."

"Because they can't hiss in church, I suppose, eh?"

"No, they can't hiss; but they can tell you when they don't like a sermon, just as well as they can when they don't like a play. Make no mistake about that, my boy, if you should think of illustrating the position of my comedy, and changing places with the curate of the parish. They can't hiss, but there is a dead, cold, leaden aspect which a congregation can assume when they don't care about a sermon, or when you have gone on too long with one they do care about. A good hiss is cheerful, compared with such a reception."

"You seem to speak feelingly, old fellow," suggested another Aborigine, sus-

pending a conversation with Mrs. Vallance for the sake of making that charitable little remark.

"Yes, I flatter myself I have preached as bad sermons as most people in my time," replied Claude.

"Candid!"

"Candid, you dog. Let one of your weekly men try to write two articles of sermon length every seventh day on almost identically the same subject, and see how soon his periodical would collapse. I only wonder how it is we have any original preachers at all, not why we have so many copyists."

"Therefore you supplement your sermons with drama, novel, and leading article. Have you tried the comic song line yet?"

"I am made all things to all men."

"For heaven's sake, Claude, not a text! What would the *Broken Reed* say?" exclaimed Mrs. Claude. "But hark, there is the bell to stop the fiddlers. I wish I didn't

know every line of this coming comedy so well by heart."

It is not necessary to follow the fortunes of the comedy through its three acts, from the time when the awakened page at the opening answered the bell and said all the servants had gone to hear Spurgeon, and therefore master can't have any dinner that day, though company was expected, down to the time when the hero and heroine, having sustained every kind of assault on their faith and practice by zealous propagandists, elect to do what is right in their own eyes, and follow the dictates of their better judgment in love as well as religion. The moral was a kindly and a healthy one; the dialogue was sparkling, the fun frequent and refined. So said the dramatic critics the next morning; and of course what is in the newspaper must be true. Strange that we often differ *toto cælo* from some young gentleman sitting next us in the dress-circle as to the merits or demerits of a work

of dramatic art ; but by-and-by, when we find the gentleman in question takes out his note-book and somewhat ostentatiously announces himself as the dramatic critic of a certain newspaper, we suspend our private judgment forthwith ; and when his Delphic periods meet our eye on the damp sheet next morning we acknowledge the power of the Fourth Estate to an extent no devotee ever did the influence of the priestly caste, by coming round to the crude notions of the young gentleman next us, as we honestly termed them last night, simply because they now reach us in minion leaded type, and in the columns of a newspaper.

At the end of the first act there was as much laying of heads together as there is when the jury stand up, and, facing one another, deliberate as to the life or liberty of a prisoner at the bar ; and Claude felt just about as comfortable as the unfortunate individual personally interested in their discussion.

“ Nice, isn’t it, Vallance ? ” said an old

hand. "Can you not sympathize with those early Christians who were slowly roasted, or the tenacious Protestants who suffered the delicate attentions narrated in Foxe's Book of Martyrs?"

When the second act was over the discussion went on again, but more openly and above-board than before, and it was easy to see the audience was in a good humour and felt relieved from the responsibility of damning a piece. An audience is naturally merciful, and only damns upon compulsion. Claude felt safe, and knew that a certain situation in the third act would turn the tide, even if it had seemed to ebb, in his favour. But the fact was it never ebbed at all, and when the curtain fell there was a tumultuous cry for the author.

Slowly and sedately, for Claude was never flurried or did anything in a hurry, he rose in his box and bowed his acknowledgment of the applause which greeted him. What, that frizzle-headed man with the big moustache and expanse of shirt-

front a parson? It was still Mrs. Claude's old, old question, *That* a parson? as though a parson must of necessity be arrayed in a permanent dress-coat like Squire Atkins's, or have the fact of his clerical office writ large upon his physiognomy. One little boy in the gallery provoked a good-natured laugh by crying out in a shrill voice—

“Houp-là, go to church, you parson!”

Claude then looked up and bowed to him, which made another laugh, and then as he was sitting down, and the large party behind him were beginning—“Congratulate you, old fellow,” he cast one glance again round the dress-circle. Gracious heaven! what does he see there that blanches his beaming face and makes him stare and gaze as though the ghosts of Hamlet senior and Banquo were both present?

Ada Parkinson and her father were seated in the dress-tier, so far round the same angle where the Vallance party were placed that no one had seen them before. The little face that he had never seen all that weary time

since last he looked upon it in Combe Dean woods was there exulting in his success, and upturned towards him, as if seeking recognition from him.

A not altogether unexpected summons from the manager gave him the opportunity of bursting away from the knot of complimenting friends. Clara gave his hand one hearty squeeze, saying, "You clever old boy; I knew it would do," when he bounded away with an alacrity which caused a humorous friend to inquire what pressing calls he had upon his resources that he was so anxious to "finger that bit of paper."

He found himself at the back of the dress-circle before he had time to consider whether it would be prudent to speak to Ada in presence of her father, but, as good—or ill—luck would have it, Captain Parkinson was hurrying away from his place to get some refreshment for Ada, and passed him in the crush as he made for the box, the other occupants of which must have thought his

head turned with his recent triumph. He could only utter her name, "Ada!"

"Claude—at last!" she said, with a great sigh of relief.

She had evidently expected him, for on the finger where he placed it of the dear tiny hand which rested in his broad palm was the ring with the motto, "*Ad mortem fidelis.*"

"It would be better I should not meet your father, or you my—my party, Ada," he whispered, when he recovered his breath. "Where are you staying?"

"At Brompton. On no account meet papa. He will be back in an instant."

"Meet me in the cemetery there to-morrow at three, will you?"

"Yes."

A sepulchral spot, as it struck him directly he had regained the corridor, and nearly fell over the Captain, who was encumbered with an ice, but it was the only one he could think of on the spur of the moment. Besides, what place so fit for their dead hearts as the

quiet cemetery? Yes, there was a natural fitness in the selection. Is there not *always* such natural fitness in all our instinctive acts? Darwin only saw a part of the truth when he made natural selection responsible for the origin of species. It descends to the minutest acts of our daily life.

He scarcely heard the felicitations of the manager, or his request that he would give him the refusal of his next piece. He had no notion what the amount was of the exceedingly satisfactory cheque placed in his hand by that potentate until he got back to his box again, and cast it as an offering into his wife's lap.

"I should hardly have thought so old a hand at literary work would have been so flurried," observed the manager; "but dramatic success is different from quiet literary fame. That piece will have a big run."

"Let us get out of the house," said Claude to his wife and party. "All come to Portland Place, mind," he added: "there is to be a symposium to-night, of course."

Everybody stated their intention of coming.

"The people have got out, I suppose," continued Claude, "those, I mean, who are not stopping for the burlesque. I always make a point of waiting in the vestry until the congregation has completely cleared off, lest I hear uncomplimentary criticism on my sermon."

"Please, Claude, forget vestries, congregations, and sermons to-night."

"I cannot, Clara. I feel as though I had been preaching a longer sermon than usual, and with much better delivery than I can command, to this big congregation."

"And the small boy shouts out to you to go to church! Why did you not adopt a *nom de théâtre*, as I suggested?"

"Don't let's argue the point to-night, Clara," he replied. "We have both of us made up our minds so thoroughly that it would only spoil the symposium, and do us no good."

He was in no mood for discussion or

quarrelling that night. He was elated with success, no doubt; who will be so affected as to pretend to be above its blandishments? But that was not all; that did not account for the placid state of happiness in which he found himself during the whole of that somewhat protracted banquet. His heart seemed slowly reviving, it might be only to die again more completely than before, to-morrow; that was very possible. But the life came slowly back to it, as in springtide the sun seems slowly to stir the sap in each bough and stalk.

"Smoking the calumet of peace," said an admiring Aborigine aloud to Mrs. Claude, who sat supported only by her sister Emily of her own sex, "your husband is the very incarnation of serenity, Mrs. Vallance. We have been contemplating your sedate visage for the last five minutes, old fellow. What are you thinking of? Are you already elaborating a plot for the next Clapham success?"

"Or meditating a text, and firstly,

secondly, thirdly, for a sermon next Sunday?" added Mrs. Claude, most unwisely returning to the tabooed subject.

"I won't have your husband chaffed, Mrs. Vallance, for his adherence to clerical functions. Egad, what a fool that old Babylon is to let a man like that drift out of the Establishment!" This gentleman did the gush for a violently Conservative paper, which was at daggers drawn with Claude and the *Clodshire Gazette*, upon every imaginable topic; but he was a vast personal admirer of Claude, and surpassed even him in his tenacity of belief as to the vitality of the National Church.

"No, Mrs. Vallance, I won't be frowned down, ma'am," he went on. "Let the old ladies in Convocation and the House of Lords only rise to the emergency, and book as many men like your husband as they can get. Then the Establishment may survive for a while, and they may wrap their aprons round them, and die with dignity before the old place tumbles down about their ears."

"Listen to him," said Claude. "This is journalistic consistency. Last Saturday he christened the Establishment Peter, and said the gates of a certain unmentionable place should never prevail against it. To-night he is a very Cassandra."

"To-night we speak in secret ; and in all sincerity I do believe, Vallance, that an element of sound secular strength alone can keep the Church up to the mark."

"Let's ask John Babylon to ordain the whole Aborigines' Club, next Sunday, in St. Paul's. I suppose they could put in some claim to the title of literates," rejoined Claude.

"Well, rather, I suppose. By the way, has this success of yours been duly wired to Sturminster, Vallance?"

"Oh yes ; Denton attended to that. We had a relay of small boys carrying bits of copy the whole evening. Miss Tart will have a column and a quarter to regale herself with at breakfast to-morrow."

"Excellent. And you have arranged

to have a marked office copy sent to John Babylon?"

"I have not forgotten that right reverend father in God, or my friend and correspondent, Mr. Twister."

The Evangelical nobleman next door to George Villars's town house slept nightly in anticipation of the closing in of the dispensation; and he felt the end to be imminent now that Providence had sent him a journalistic and play-writing parson in the adjoining house, who, together with his friends, seemed never to go to bed, and always to be bawling for hansoms at the small hours of the morning.





CHAPTER VI.

GOD'S ACRE.

IT was an afternoon in early autumn, that saddest season of all the year, when Claude set out towards his strange trysting-place. There seemed, as so often is the case, a mysterious sympathy between the man and his surroundings. After a more than usually delicious summer, the year was perceptibly waning to its close. The days were getting short, the evenings chill, and the long shadows fell early, like eager heirs come to claim the autumn's golden treasures which the decrepit fingers of the dying year could no more hold in their grasp. The falling leaves descended in quite a shower around him, and muffled his footsteps on the path as Claude paced the principal avenue in the cemetery, waiting

for Ada. Their previous interview had been so hurried, that there was no time to specify localities in detail.

Drawn thither, as it seemed to him, by some strange sympathy with the season as well as the place, there was more than the usual number of quiet mourners tending the scanty flowers on the graves of departed dear ones. What a beautiful concentration of aim on one unselfish object did it seem to him, as he saw some poor uninteresting-looking person working away inartistically enough at the little green flower-clad mound, surmounted by the vulgar monument or hideous headstone; and every now and again going to fetch pots of water for the straggling evergreens. He could not help thinking, what if Ada had really died, and he had come to visit her grave there, and hang his wreath of dried flowers upon the marble cross above her coffin! Perhaps it would have been happier for them both had such been the case. This death in life is a terrible infliction. He had been feeling it—

perhaps she had been feeling it, for he knew nothing as yet—a weary, weary while. How much better if one of them had departed, and the other come thither to God's Acre—as yon quiet watchers had come—to stand like Mary by the Sepulchre, and think kindly of the auld lang syne and the dear head that was pillowed beneath at rest, and for ever.

A funeral passed him as he sat there among the red and withered leaves; one of those horrible heathen processions by which we mark our Christian belief that those who go from us have mounted to a higher plane of existence, simply obeying the loving injunction “Friend, go up higher.” We blazon it, forsooth, in an army of seedy undertakers, with gin-bedizened faces; horses with nodding plumes; and yonder fearful black box, which holds another chest again, instead of the dear one being borne “barefaced on the bier” to his or her last resting-place. It struck him more than ever as a remarkable confession

of faith, an embodied Athanasian creed, with nothing but damnatory clauses. There was the special parson come in his academic gown to "perform the ceremony;" there the doctor and lawyer, each looking profoundly bored, and wearing the most perfunctory of visages; and then one or two real mourners got up in property-cloaks, and hatbands which would creep down the small of their backs, and unbonnet them by sticking to the cloth lining of the capacious vehicle. It was the whole story of society written in miniature; one or two bleeding hearts, and the rest of the gew-gaw made up of hired mourners and professors, who lived by the very obsequies they attended as truly as the noisome woman who "laid out" the body, the carpenter who made night hideous as he drove the nails in the coffin, or the sexton who smoked and sang while he dug the grave.

Such is life—and such death!

Besides the persons who were thus attracted to the cemetery, so to say, by busi-

ness, there were those whom one sees in all such places round London ; the loafers and idlers hanging about after their own dead-alive fashion. There were the country cousins who had come to "do" this grim place among the sights of London, and who gazed at the pagan monuments of broken pillars and cinerary urns, as though they had been the works of Phidias. The few crosses and other signs of Christian sentiment they passed hurriedly over, as being "high."

Again, Claude was conscious of that feeling which was more than indifference to, which was positive hatred of, all his surroundings save one, and that was the dear girl for whom he waited now. It was no use to argue that he had other ties, and that this feeling must be expelled. It simply would not be driven out ; and he found himself quoting, in articulate language, the words "How useless, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world !" Is it true, as some have deemed, that the

soul of man is a twin separated from its fellow, and wandering earth wearily till it finds it, anticipating Heaven when it is found?

"I have never realized," he said to himself, "that delicious feeling of rest, that intense satisfaction of all desires—body, mind, and spirit—save in Ada's society. Surely that must be the strange thing we elect to call love, or else I have not felt it at all."

It was, by another singular coincidence, to this cemetery that they had borne his dead little one. There seemed a sort of natural fitness that Ada should see him here. He went and stood over the tiny marble head-cross, and speculated still.

"I wonder whether *he* would have been to me what—whether I choose to confess it or not—Ada now is and has been ever since the evening I first saw her, whatever else has occurred, whatever new relations I have formed. Yet no. He might have shared her supremacy ; but Ada——"

He was lost in thought, and scarcely aware of another presence until a light touch was laid on his arm, a little face was looking up into his, and he heard the sound of a familiar voice say to him—

“Claude, do you not know me?”

“Ada!”

He said no more, but drew her to him, and there, by his dead child's grave, kissed the unresisting lips. For one or two minutes neither spoke. It was one of those “brilliant flashes of silence” of which we are all conscious as occurring at times when it would seem there is so much to be said. At length he led her to a seat which was close by, and whispered—

“Ada, I have lived for this. I have been dead rather, and am alive again. And you, Ada?”

“I don't know how I *have* lived until this, Claude. I thought your coldness would have killed me.”

“My coldness, Ada!”

“Your silence, which I could only inter-

pret as coldness. When the weeks and months went by, and you never answered my letters, I thought you had quite forgotten me—forgotten this,” and she drew the glove from her little wasted hand to show him his own ring. “*Ad mortem fidelis*. I thought you were either dead or faithless; and when I learnt you were not dead, I thought you must have forgotten your faith.”

“I see it all, Ada,” he exclaimed. “A mist seems clearing away from my brain. You wrote—of course. Fool that I was not to suspect!”

“Then do you think my letters were intercepted?”

“Think! I am sure of it. Why did I not guess it then? I was living at Pomona House.”

“At Pomona House; and Mrs.——”

“Don’t finish that sentence, Ada. It’s as well not to realize it, or at all events not to put it into words. I must have been under some spell not to have known it then.

Idiot that I was, I might have known that nothing short of physical impossibility would have prevented your writing, and I should have searched England through for you."

"You would not have found me if you had, for we were at Boulogne. Papa took extraordinary precautions to prevent detection. It puzzled me then why he should be so very anxious to get me away from you when he liked you so much; but I think—I fear—in fact I know now—there were other reasons for papa wishing to be out of the way then, and not to draw public attention to our movements."

"But we are together now, Ada, together as in the old times."

"Together—but not as in the old times."

"Ah no, I had forgotten in the rapture of meeting you again. We are separated—hopelessly separated—by my new relations. Is it not so, Ada?"

"Hopelessly so, of course."

"But is it so hopeless after all?" he

continued. "Do you believe it is hopeless. Do you not believe in our prior marriage?"

"I do, Claude; but you——"

"What!"

"You could not have, or you would not have made a second one."

"I cannot attempt to explain or hope to exculpate myself. It is one of those acts upon which a man looks back with amazement and asks, 'Can I have done this?' Realize my position, Ada. I thought I had lost you. I thought your vows were empty air, the same as I had heard breathed by many a girl before, and knew at the time that they *were* empty air——"

"But you did not think mine were, did you?"

"For one weak wicked while I did; and there were those by ready to favour the idea. Under such a notion I thought I might as well drift——"

"The old word, dear Claude; and so you drifted into matrimony. But I had the same reason to doubt—more, in fact; for I

did write, and you did not answer. Yet I never drifted, Claude——”

“Ada, you are an angel. Your name means brightness, and whatever brightness there has been in my life has come from you, and shall come from you again.”

“I scarcely see how that can be—in the future.”

“Nor do I, but I have a supreme conviction that so it will be. What devil's complication it is that has separated us I cannot quite tell, nor can I see the exact method by which it will be made right again, but I have firm faith that such will be the case. Have not you?”

“Wait awhile. You used to say you trusted a woman's judgment. That judgment leads me to look facts in the face.”

“Listen, Ada. I would not finish the sentence just now, and I will not mention names in what I am going to say—at least will not mention a name. First of all let me tell you that our marriage in Combe Dean Church was witnessed.”

"By whom?"

"By Oliver Jones."

"By Oliver Jones," exclaimed Ada, "of all men in the world!"

"Of all men in the world by him. He was not acting for himself, or not by himself at all events, in this matter; and I have no doubt, though of course I shall never be able to prove, that he confiscated your letters. I recollect now my letters always came to me at second-hand, never direct from the postman."

Ada then told Claude of Jones's interview with her at Boulogne, and the unsuccessful result of the little man's wooing. He was angry with himself at being fooled so easily; but straightway, with all a man's impetuosity, and with his own peculiar habit of "drifting," seemed to think all was set perfectly straight again now they had met.

"You dear silly old thing," said Ada, just as she used to talk to him of old, "do you forget that I have slipped away from papa with the greatest difficulty, that I ought to be back now, and that it may be

weeks before I am able to meet you again ; if, indeed," and here she assumed a staid look which did not in the least alarm Claude, "if I ought to meet you at all: for please to recollect you are a married man, and I am——"

"Miss Propriety ; O yes, we know all about that. But now," he added, "I want to ask you two questions, and remember, madam, you are on your oath."

"I didn't know it ; but still what are the questions?"

"In the first place, Do you consider that marriage in Combe Dean church binding on you?"

"I told you I considered it a sacrament. I am bound for ever by it—*Ad mortem fidelis*. What your case may be I do not know—fit only for the Divorce Court, I should think—but I accept the words, 'faithful till death' in their literal sense."

"Seriously?"

"Most seriously. Now your second question?"

"Do you love me still?"

"I think that question had better not have been asked, perhaps — though why? You know my answer. I love you exactly as when at that altar-rail we plighted our troth as man and wife."

"Then let Fate do her worst. I am happy. Are not you?"

"For the moment, yes; but I must leave you, and then——"

"It will not be for long. It cannot be for long."

"Claude, don't talk against facts again. They are such stubborn things, you know."

"They are; but my will is more stubborn still. I will force facts to square with it."

"Can we force facts, I wonder?"

"I accept to-day as an omen that Destiny is relenting in our favour. What less likely than that we should meet at the theatre?"

"Please don't credit Destiny with that. That was my doing. I saw your piece advertised, and forced papa to take places."

"Destiny brought you to England in the nick of time. Destiny brought the play-bill under your notice. Destiny took your dear papa to that beatified refreshment-room, by which means finally Destiny brought us here. O yes; she is clearly for us now, repenting in dust and ashes for her previous ill-treatment."

Then at last for a short time Claude condescended to come down from the seventh heaven of delight into which he had soared, and to discuss the matter on ordinary grounds of prudence and common sense. They debated whether they should let matters continue as they were, and trust to the chance of meeting once in three months or so, or whether it would be better to plan a *rencontre* between Claude and the Captain, so that there might be a domestic element in their association. The peculiar feature in these plans was that, by tacit consent, Mrs. Vallance's name was never mentioned by one or the other, and her existence was looked upon as the most unim-

portant of all possible considerations. It was the natural sense of justice asserting itself, perhaps. They felt they had been forced by her into a false position, and now claimed to ignore her in their schemes for the future.

Twenty times did Ada rise to go, protesting that her papa would be alarmed at her absence, and as often did Claude detain her, holding her tiny hand in his, and drawing her back to their rude seat. Many too were the repetitions of that salute which might have been spontaneous and unintentional at their first meeting, but which was deliberate enough now. How completely were all the relations of life changed for him since he entered the cemetery that afternoon. On his way thither he had felt something like compunction for having made the appointment. A passing idea crossed his mind that, even supposing it made, it had been better anywhere else than by the graveside of his dead child. Now he felt that it was well for him—for them—to be there,

and there of all other places in the wide world. Now he felt he was near the only two beings who had ever drawn deeply upon his feelings.

"Come with me, Ada, close to that little grave," he said, and they stood, hand in hand by the cross. "There lies the only one who, since you left me, has really been your rival. Your rival he would never have been; for, if he were living now—he *is* living, and by us, I believe—but if he were as he was when I knew him here, and I kissed his little lips as I have done a thousand times, I should feel it no abrupt transition to pass from his kiss to yours. Who shall dare to tell us that one is not as holy as the other?"

Ada remained looking thoughtfully and silently down at the little grave. He proceeded—

"I fancy, if I were a woman, I should like to be loved as you are at this moment. There is no Act of Parliament element in it; no labelling the couple

'engaged,' like a seat at the theatre, or a compartment of a railway carriage. It is this business aspect that takes the very life and soul out of passion. Our love for each other was pure and natural—as natural as was mine for the poor little innocent whose body sleeps below. What has occurred to change it?"

"Your marriage," timidly suggested Ada. She did not add—though perhaps she thought—"your broken vow." He answered the possible thought rather than the actual words.

"They made me think you were dead—dead to me. It was not that I wished to be absolved from my vow and that the wish was father to the thought; you see I turn and twist my motives every way to account even to myself, for my actions. No; I believed you dead, and so I cared not what became of me."

This was not exactly a flattering remark to make in reference to his marriage with Clara; and when he set out that afternoon

Claude would have been unable to frame his lips to make it. But he now felt perfectly certain—in fact, it was impossible to doubt—that Clara had suppressed the letters addressed to him by Ada. Should he tax her with it, and learn the truth? Supposing the truth was as he felt assured it was, then his cognizance of it must result in utter alienation. Better almost not to know, though even the suspicion was terrible, and he might be doing her injustice in harbouring it. There was just the possibility, but scarcely the probability, that Oliver Jones had acted on his own account, if at all, in this matter. Ada rather favoured this supposition. She was unwilling to believe that Mrs. Vallance had resorted to such a method for compassing her ends. She had carefully preserved the date of every letter she had written to Claude, and gave him the list.

“I feel certain,” he said, as he scanned it, “that, at some of these dates, Jones was away canvassing for the Stomachic Ale. I

will take this list, if you will allow me, and give it to you when we meet to-morrow."

"The list was made for you. I felt sure we should meet one day, and that there would turn out to be some mistake—some dreadful mistake—in all this. But, Claude——"

"Yes, dear."

"I never said I would meet you to-morrow; and do you think it's quite right for you to call me 'dear?'"

"You *are* going to meet me to-morrow, here in this spot and a trifle earlier than to-day. I haven't said one tithe of what I wanted to to-day. The mere meeting has taken my breath away. As to calling you 'dear,' since I think you are dear, I suppose I may as well say so, may I not?"

"Perhaps. But now I must be going, and remember you are to sit here until I am well clear of the cemetery."

This he sternly declined to do, and in fact walked nearly to her own door with her. Was it that he still wished for an

earthquake or some other convulsion of nature as in the old Combe Dean days? It really looked like it.

And how did it happen that, as soon as Claude and Ada left the cemetery, Oliver Jones, instead of being at his post in Sturminster or the Borough, came up to the seat where they had been sitting, and gazed at it as though expecting they would have left some of their secrets behind them? His soliloquy may enlighten us.

Gazing first at the seat, then at the child's grave, he said to himself—

“Hang me if this isn't Combe Dean church over again. These two are gradually going over all the occasional offices of the Church of England together. However, I haven't been acting amateur detective for nothing. How lucky I happened to go into the pit at the Clapham Theatre! I knew there would be an appointment directly I saw him go to her place, and haven't I stuck to his heels this blessed day, that's all? It's for you, Mrs. Claude, now. I've

outgrown my little weakness. I thought old Parkinson's game was a safer one than it has turned out. Mine's a deal more profitable than his, with infinitely fewer chances of detection. I thought we might have played into one another's hands, and the girl might have been useful. Besides, I was a bit spoony, I'm ashamed to say. Shall I tell Mrs. Claude of this?" he debated, as he turned on his heel to go. "I think not; or at all events not just yet. I'll save it up and use it as I did the Combe Dean matter when occasion requires. If I told, it might hasten the inevitable too soon for my purposes. Gracious! what a flare-up it would make, and will make one of these days. I haven't forgotten that Boulogne business, Miss Parkinson. We shall square accounts yet."

And so he sheered off, looking like a very small and ugly Mephistopheles indeed.

Never for a long time had Claude been in such spirits as he was that day at dinner; and never was woman's boasted judgment

farther at fault than Mrs. Claude Vallance's when she attributed the circumstance to his having grown out of what she chose to call his Puritanical ideas about church-work. The fact was, as he realized to himself, he felt as though a weight had gone from him now he had met Ada again. The trifling complication of his married state scarcely weighed in the balance. He could not even feel as angry as he knew he ought to feel with his wife for the part he saw she must have played. Perhaps deep down in his consciousness—so deep down that he did not realize it himself—there was a feeling of pride that he was worth so much trouble to win.

"Picture yourself, instead of being your own master, as you now are," said his wife, "set up to lecture the butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers, with perhaps an Evangelical Rector to sit upon you, and John Babylon and Twister always ready to drop down upon the slightest deviation from Puritanism."

"Then for once you think I have done right, my dear."

"I do ; and that makes you in such good spirits, no doubt."

"The *mens conscia recti*," added Claude, looking the veriest hypocrite under the sun save for a slight twitch of the mouth into the semblance of a laugh, which, however, Mrs. Vallance was far too well pleased with things in general to detect.

The School of the Sceptics thrrove, and now assumed the form of a Sunday Discussion Society. The Socratic element proved as attractive to one portion of the community as the music did to another ; and Twister, who was sent by John Babylon into the penny places, clad in a green tie and a cavalry moustache, was obliged to confess that the new school was a "draw." That was the one thing John Babylon could never do. Whenever he preached at any church it had the effect Byron speaks of in his "Vision of Judgment;" it drew most souls—another way. On the occasion of Twister's visit,

Claude read a paper on the Sunday question, strongly advocating the opening of Museums, Art Galleries, &c., and, in the course of the subsequent discussion, Mrs. Vallance contrasted the merry Continental Sabbath with the sour whisky-drinking Lord's Day north of Tweed, into which she said Sabbatarianism was gradually reducing the day of which holy George Herbert wrote—

“ O day most calm, most bright,
The fruit of this, the next world's bud,
The endorsement of supreme delight,
Writ by a friend and with his blood;
The couch of time, care's balm and bay,
The week were dark but for thy light;
Thy torch doth show the way.”

This kind of clerical work, if so it could be by any amount of courtesy be termed, was exactly to Clara's taste, no doubt because she could bear her share in it.

“ I have no notion,” she used to say, “ of knocking under to that misogynist Paul, who said, with all the assumption of a mediæval pope, ‘ I suffer not a woman to speak.’ Why should my share in church-

work be limited to providing moral pocket-handkerchiefs for the school-children, and twisting wreaths at decoration times, under the superintendence of a feeble curate?"

She had enlarged the sphere of her operations now, until she was something like a modern Hypatia. The School of the Sceptics numbered few better speakers than Mrs. Vallance, and she was so bold a disputant that no subject scared her. Population questions, involving the most delicate details, were among those she preferred to handle, both in her speeches and communications to the *Clodshire Gazette*. Miss Tart used to rub her eyes and wonder what the public papers were coming to. "And I verily believe, Sarah, that's from the pen of Mrs. Vallance. I thought that dreadful man would ruin her morals." Gules, in his rustic retirement, thought Clara was going a little too far; and as for Mr. and Mrs. Denton, they felt it was time to sing their *Nunc Dimittis* in duet; the world was getting too far ahead of them.

Ada did manage to meet Claude again the next day in God's Acre, and Claude in the meantime had, by comparison of dates, discovered that Oliver Jones could not have been the sole agent, if he were agent at all, in the suppression of his letters. That small worthy had retired to Sturminster to plan the next movement in the campaign. He had never forgiven Claude's interference in the matter of Flower Fielding, and though he was punctual in the fulfilment of his stipulations, he was determined to do everything himself, and constantly came up to town on that, as well as other, business. That accounted for his presence in the theatre, and consequently in the cemetery.

"I owe each of you a good turn, and you shall have it one of these days," he murmured, as he squeezed himself into a corner of a third-class carriage bound for Sturminster, and debited the firm with first-class fare in his pocket-book.

But in the glamour of their renewed association Claude and Ada never dreamed

it was possible there could be any machinations against them. They never paused to argue the right and wrong of the matter, or if they did they persuaded themselves that two wrongs made one right, and that, since Mrs. Vallance had done them such cruel wrong, they might with impunity do her another. Perhaps Ada had gone through some such process as this by herself. They seldom talked of the matter when they were together. They were as thoroughly lovers again as they had been in the Combe Dean woods; and though their sepulchral surroundings were not so romantic, they yet seemed equally appropriate.

"That little cross yonder—I always like us to keep in sight of it—seems to consecrate our meeting, Ada. I *dare* not meet you in presence of that if I felt there was aught but what is purest in our association."

"You said the other day, Claude, you believed the child was by us. Do you really think so?"

"I cannot see what else the great forty days after the resurrection were meant to teach us, save that the parted spirit, clad in its new etherial body, which renders it independent of material obstacles, lingers long and lovingly around its old home and old friends."

"And you told me long since you believe affection survives."

"Such natural affection as mine for that boy, or ours for each other, yes, most certainly; but not that which passes current for affection in society, and gets formulated in engagements or marriage settlements."

"I do not dignify that with the name."

"It is character which survives. Character is the impression stamped in upon the personality. If we survived without our loves and hatreds, it would not be ourselves but somebody else that rose, like free and independent phoenixes, from our ashes. Should I be myself if I rose again without my love for you?"

"Then will you forgive me for saying,

Claude, how fortunate it was nothing happened to you during the period while you doubted me, and somebody else was in the ascendant? You did not love me then, you know."

"I did love you; never more than when I doubted you most. That persistent love became a part of self, and had I died then, the first clear-seeing glance of the disembodied spirit—clothed upon with its new etherial vestment—would have told me all the truth."

"You think so?"

"Can we doubt that the next step shall be one in advance? I am going to take that magnificent argument from analogy in the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, and analyse it for the edification of my Sadducee followers. 'How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?' will form a fine title for a series of lectures. It's strange to think what utter pagans many people are in these matters, though born, baptized, registered,

vaccinated, and confirmed in a Christian country."

"Vaccinated, Claude!"

"Upon my life the baptism and confirmation don't seem to have any more effect on their spiritual natures."

So they sat and talked as of yore, happy in the present, deferring all thoughts of the future. Did Claude feel that the day of reckoning must come; and may come at any moment? It were hard to say. Certain it is he never was in more boisterous spirits. His newspaper work, both in London and Sturminster, was more brilliant than ever, and his Sunday Lectures every week proved more attractive. Yet none of these formed his real life, or even the outcome of his true self. That true self only one kindred soul was privileged to see, and she was a wee girl who waited for him almost every day in Brompton Cemetery, and told her papa she was obliged to visit a pupil in order to cover their household expenses. She did give a casual hour now and then to a red-haired

little girl to whose mamma Claude recommended Ada, and who lent herself to the pleasant fiction of paying exorbitant terms which were really supplied by himself.

"I am going to make my next Sunday's paper one on 'Platonic Love.' Will you oppose me, Clara?" he said to his wife.

"Dead."

"Agreed, then. You will find the paper in my study. Go and post yourself up in the argument," he rejoined, as he left Portland Place for Fleet Street—*en route* to Brompton Cemetery, where he was studying his subject in the concrete instead of the abstract.





CHAPTER VII.

PLATONIC LOVE.

CLAUDE VALLANCE had another secret from his wife, besides his stolen meetings with Ada. Indeed, on the cardinal subjects of love and religion these two, who had the misfortune to be married to each other, took views which daily become more divergent. It was difficult to account for Claude's great and somewhat sudden impetus towards spiritual pursuits. He had, as we have seen, to a great extent drifted into clerical life; and really, without intentionally disparaging it, looked at it for a long time as purely subsidiary to his literary career. Now the order of importance was clearly being reversed in his estimation. Was the same change taking place in him as Edmund Waller so beauti-

fully described in his own case, when he said—

“ The soul’s dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that time has
made !”

Was it simply, as he sometimes himself thought, that he was getting older, and so gradually truer views of life presented themselves to his view? Was it—this he thought very often—that his child having assumed the potency of its spiritual nature, was producing this effect upon him? Very often the feeling used to come so thoroughly as an impression from without himself, that it almost assumed the semblance of an articulate voice; and he felt that he could understand something of what was meant by the “call” of the old prophet, or early apostle, or those whom we now too lightly name fanatics. He rather clung to the idea that his child from beyond was using the strong rapport ensured by its brief association with him to attract him to a higher range of thought than was suggested by his

ordinary avocations ; and he felt that he only had to spiritualize somewhat his spiritual functions in order to answer the call, come whence it might. Happily his clerical experiences had never assumed that commercial aspect which they had to others who were deemed more successful in the Church. He could quite understand, he said, religion resolving itself into a matter of £ s. d. with John Babylon, soils and superphosphates with Mr. Denton, or crucifixes and vestments with Cyprian Gules. It was no credit to him, but simply an accident of his position that it occupied higher and purely unique ground in his estimation.

Cut off as he now was by the recent action of his right reverend father in God from the regular exercise of his clerical calling, and scarcely satisfied with the polemical theology of the School of the Sceptics, he gradually elaborated the idea of a simple service which should reproduce, as far as possible, the genius of Primitive Chris-

tianity. This, he knew, was the boast of every sect, from the Mormonites upwards ; and it was quite possible that each one did embody some one trait of the ancient Christian Commune. It appeared to him that the prominent feature of early Christianity was that which centered round the Eucharist as a Feast of Love ; not as a repetition of the Tragedy of Calvary, but as a reminiscence of the Idyll of the Christian life. It gradually became more clear to him that the sacrificial theory was a mere concession to, or rather adoption of, Paganism ; and he would endeavour to go back to an earlier and better era, to one more thoroughly representative of the religion he professed.

“ John Babylon,” he used to say to himself, “ is my crux. That potentate in his gingerbread coach is about as purely the representative of unspirituality as his hard face is the reverse of what we picture the Marred Visage of the Man of Sorrows to have been. Let us go with the Irvingite

back to an era which shall, at all events, be antecedent to this Episcopal one. Between the Apostle and the Bishop it is as difficult to find any resemblance as to trace an English etymology to the Greek, even with the help of the digamma."

So they did go back to the antecedent era. In a little double parlour of a house which Claude hired specially for the purpose, and fitted up the lower portion as a simple oratory, Ada and he celebrated their first Agape, prior to the admission of one or two congenial spirits into the circle. The place was smaller far than the school of the Positivists, and the dominant idea was the consecration of the domestic element in the Supper of Love. Claude gradually and gracefully slid out of the School of the Sceptics, leaving it to the more congenial management of the lay members, among whom Mrs. Claude reigned supreme, and turned his attention to this his last excursus in the way of experimental religion.

In his tiny conventicle, which he named

the Oratory of the Holy Spirit—"the place where prayer was wont to be made"—did this most eccentric of clerics elaborate his sacramental worship. Mostly at eventide—for was it not a Supper? but also at different times in the day, and with a congregation of men and women in earnest like himself, Claude celebrated after his own fashion, the crowning mystery of the Christian religion. He followed the Greek rite so far, that his altar was no altar at all in the conventional sense of the word, but an actual square table draped with a simple white cloth, with a red cross embroidered on each corner, and the passion-flower in the centre. Two antique silver candlesticks, a cross, a vase of flowers with chalice, paten, and flagon were its sole adornments; and the office was based on that of the Church of England, though with considerable variations. For the Ten Commandments he substituted the Beatitudes, omitted Creed, Collect, Epistle and Gospel, and supplemented the offering of the elements with

passages taken from several eastern liturgies ; amongst others that exquisite prayer from the Eucharistic office of St. John Chrysostom, which he translated freely thus :—

“ O Lord our God who hast appointed in the heavens bands and armies of Angels and Archangels, for the worship of Thy glory ; grant that, as we draw near Thee, there may approach us too the Holy Angels, worshipping with us, and joining to praise Thy goodness. For to Thee belong all glory, honour, and worship,” &c.

“ There seems to me,” he said to Ada, as he read his version of the prayer when they were sitting in their accustomed place in the cemetery, “ something positively unearthly in the flow of those sentences. One regrets having to translate the prayer.”

“ It is very beautiful.”

“ And now, Ada, there is only one detail that is necessary to make my quiet worship perfect.”

“ And that is——?”

“ Your voice must lead the singing.”

"But your wife, Claude—and papa?"

"My wife would laugh at the whole thing. It is simply a difference of temperament. She does not feel the need of these aids to devotion. Perhaps the necessity is only a sign of spiritual weakness. As to your papa, we must manage that difficulty as best we may. The pupil covers a multitude of sins."

They were now fairly embarked in that difficult and delicate problem of Platonic love which has lain at the bottom of more systems of theology than we suspect. From doctrine Claude's free thinking had passed to morality; from creed to conduct. As he had ceased to hold one man above another, save as he proved his spirituality by his life, or one place more hallowed than another, except such as was consecrated by the presence of two or three gathered together in the sacred name: so he now cast to the wind conventional systems of morality, save in so far as they recommended themselves to his conscience. The conscience void of

offence was the sole criterion he allowed ; the text, "To the pure all things are pure," was the basis of his liberal code of morality.

"I am wearied of formularies, tired of organizations of all kinds," he said. "Here let us group ourselves, the fewer the better, purely by our natural, unforced sympathies, and let the churches and chapels fight it out among themselves."

"It is very peaceful, though I suppose the world would say we were ruinously wrong."

"Where was ever the great truth that had not at some time or another to pass through the phase of heresy?"

"I was not thinking of your doctrines, dear Claude, though you are very strange, you know," and she opened her earnest eyes wide as she looked into his ; "but I was thinking of your practice."

"Meaning your irregular little self, I suppose."

"Meaning most certainly myself."

"There I am ready to join issue with Mrs. Grundy when the time comes, as come I suppose it must. We can scarcely hope to go on existing in what the world would call a Fools' Paradise for ever. I wish to use no harsh words, though they will have to be spoken I suppose when the time comes. We must not let it take us by surprise, as we did at Combe Dean. Let us profit so far by that experience. We know that our relations one to the other are pure, though the world would doubt it."

"I fear so."

"I was led by a cruel deceit into contracting a marriage which, even irrespective of what had preceded it, was, I believe, in the sight of Heaven no marriage at all—not even the semblance of it, when we consider the previous marriage that had taken place with you. I am anxious not to wound your father or my wife—cruelly as they have both treated me—by letting them know of our intercourse. The world speaks lightly of such an association as far as a man is con-

cerned. You have counted the cost, have you not, for yourself?"

"I have."

"And really you are the only one who is liable to be wronged by society."

"I fall back on my previous sacramental theory. You are mine. You were made mine before another came between us. I cannot excuse what you have since done, though I can understand, and freely, fully forgive it. It touches only the merest externals of our marriage. The real relation once for all formed for life, death, and eternity, it can never affect in the least."

Hideous sophistry as the world would deem this argument, the sternest censor would have found it difficult to be severe upon the unsophisticated girl who was enunciating it. It was simply her heart's creed, which she was only learning now for the first time to put into words.

"And what," he used to say over and over again—for they seemed to bear a charmed

life, and there was none, as far as they knew, to mark their coming and going—"what will the end of all this be? I ask you, Ada, because in these matters I trust a woman's judgment, a woman's intuition I would rather say. Women see, whilst we argue. What do you *feel* the end will be?"

"I cannot say *what* it will be, but I know it will all come right."

She knew it would all come right. She could look into futurity so far as to see that, though she might not guess the curious means by which Nemesis would bring about the result. How happy a limit is that which bounds our horizon in the future; happier even than the Lethe river which limits it in the past!

And he, as often as she said this, though she seemed to be speaking against all probabilities—might he not say possibilities?—of success, would feel his heart buoyed up with a new elation. He trusted that simple girl's dictum more than he would have believed the conclusion of the most demon-

strative argumentation. She felt it would all come right ; and on that feeling they lived their strange life, one in heart and soul, though separated widely as the poles by all that could outwardly unite them.

In the meantime the London leader-writing, the Sturminster correspondence, the Saturday evening receptions, and the Sunday suppers went on as usual. Claude's pen was never so prolific, his wife never helped him so thoroughly as at this time. He had considerably more work offered him than he could do, and could name his own price in many quarters for what he chose to undertake. He had outgrown the fatal necessity of writing too much, or scamping his work.

"Upon my word, a very pleasant version of Bohemia, indeed," said Mr. Denton, who had come up to see Miles on an interesting occasion closely connected with a christening, and of course formed one of the Portland Place circle. "I thought you authors lived mostly in garrets on pipes and pots of porter. Port-

land Place is a very agreeable corrective of one's ideas."

"The Aborigines themselves have been converted by our means," said Clara, glancing proudly round on the little knot of men who always surrounded her. "They have given up their simple war-paint and woad, and assumed the garb of civilized existence."

"Mrs. Vallance prides herself on the reclamation of these interesting heathens, sir," Claude chimed in ; "and likes nothing so much as to show them clothed and in their right mind."

She was, in very truth, proud of her surroundings ; of none more than her husband. By one of those strange contradictions which sometimes meet us, Mrs. Vallance never seemed to prize her husband's position and association, never seemed so secure in his affections as now, when she might be on the eve of losing him altogether. He was a good deal away ; the nature of his avocations explained that sufficiently, even without her being made aware

of his interviews with Ada and his frequent services at his oratory. The very rarity of his presence made her enjoy it the more.

It was perhaps a lack of moral courage on his part, though he tracked it in his self-examinings no further than his old habit of drifting and dislike of "scenes," that he did not demand from Clara an account of the intercepted letters. That again, however, would have let her into the secret that Ada and he had met, and perhaps break up the pretty Fools' Paradise, as those Platonic lovers elected to call their present condition. No; he would drift on. Existence was never more delicious. He could scarcely wish it otherwise.

"It's an awful heresy to broach, Ada," he said one day, when they were lingering over the fire in the little conventicle after everybody else had gone, "but I cannot bring myself to wish that things had turned out otherwise. I would, of course, have spared you—spared myself—that anxious period of separation; but when I look back and think

what might have been, I feel we have much to be thankful for." He was pressing both her little hands in his, fondling them as, above all else, he loved to do; and he continued—"Supposing I had seen papa on that eventful morning when I found you had struck tent, like a couple of Bedouins, and gone away. Supposing I had overruled his objections to my then impecunious self, and that we two had been duly made one in Sturminster Church, and lived happily ever after as parson and parson's wife—possibly with the parson's long family—in Clodshire. Would that have been quite the life we should have liked?"

"I should have liked it—with you."

"No, now really would you though, better than this charmingly irregular kind of existence, which I half suspect to be so pleasant because it is so wrong?"

"I make no comparisons. We are together; that is enough for me."

"Even picture a smile on the visage of John Glastonbury—for I am thinking now

of him as such, not as John Babylon—that he had taken me to his bosom like another McLachlan, and given me all he had to give—a son-in-law living, should I have liked it? would it have suited me half as well as this free and independent existence? I really do feel, Ada, we have an immense deal to be thankful for.”

It was a Fools’ Paradise, no doubt, but to them it was as a vision of the Delectable Mountains. It was a practical comment on Mrs. Vallance’s position at the School of the Sceptics, where, in the discussion on Platonic love, she argued that there was no such thing possible for men and women constituted as they now are. For some ideal Loves of the Angels; for a time and state, supposing such to exist, when sense should be eliminated along with the bodily organism which was its seat and source—for such, argued Mrs. Claude, Platonic love might be possible, and might suffice. But she took facts as she found them. We must legislate, she urged, not for contingencies, but for existing cir-

cumstances. Claude and Ada would have said that one such fact was worth a hundred theories, and that, *as* a fact, they were realizing that conception whose possibility Clara denied. Claude was prudent. He held his tongue and spoke nothing; he kept silence, yea, even from good words. He knew, moreover, that even had he been in a position to instance the case he had in his mind, the fair disputant would still have been unconvinced. She would have denied that merely spiritual affection, independent of corporeal considerations, drew them either to other. She would have said, "Wait: the sensuous element will crop up." She would, no doubt, had she known who the lady was, and suffered herself to be led away by prejudice, have added that the girl was only a trifle more hypocritical than the rest of her sex; that these immaculate damsels always were the worst in reality. As it was, however, she needed no such additional arguments to enforce her view of the case. The School of the Sceptics was with her by a

very large majority. Some few, principally the young men and maidens of that Socratic assembly, rallied round Claude, and went in for the Loves of the Angels ; but, as a whole, the Sceptics decided that we were very human indeed, and that it was dubious whether we should ever be anything else, whether when the humanity, as now we understood the term, dropped off, the personality did not disappear altogether ; whether, in a word, death were not annihilation.

To this conclusion Mrs. Vallance had come. She was scarcely entitled to call herself a sceptic on this point, for she had pretty well drafted her creed of negation. The impetus once given to inquiry in her mind carried her farther than it did her husband. He was content to doubt ; she must go on to deny. He was Broad Church—latitudinarian beyond a doubt ; but he was a genuine sceptic. He held most subjects to be open questions, and welcomed further light from any source. His wife's attitude

was a bolder one. She disbelieved, and held that her infidelity was the only true light. She was wont to dwell with some effusion on the comfort it was to her, when first she lost her hold on faith.

"I owe it to you, you dreadful Broad Churchman," she would say to Claude, "that my religious convictions were first shaken. Pomona House was the pink of orthodoxy until you set your heretical foot over the threshold."

"The fact is you never thought at all about the matter."

"That is something very near the truth, I believe."

"And now, like the little boy who was taught by his grandfather to play at draughts, and immediately went on to beat the old man unmercifully at that game, you have considerably distanced your instructor."

"And yet, such is the advantage of your elastic creed, there is no fear of your being angry with me, as that historic old gentleman was with his grandson, for

giving you the go-by. We can agree to differ."

"Can we?" thought Claude. If Clara knew of the conventicle, would even her elastic creed stretch so as to comprehend that in its large charity? Would she bear to embrace Ada in love and affection because her own principles had outgrown conventionality? Nay, was not Claude himself at that moment burning with resentment against his wife because her laxity of principle on a certain memorable occasion exceeded what he thought justifiable. How continually do events occur which baffle all our previsions, and which no amount of stretching will make even our most elastic creeds cover!

This special question of Platonic Love, besides being discussed and negatived at the School of the Sceptics, and in addition to its being so very practically illustrated by Claude and Ada, was engrossing attention even in the quiet seclusion of Sturminster. Mr. Oliver Jones had grown with the

growing establishment of Mr. George Villars, and had become what is commonly called his "right-hand man," a sort of commercial father confessor into whose keeping the mercantile conscience is entrusted. He had gradually, as he set himself to do, become acquainted with the minutest details of Mr. Villars's affairs, and had proved himself so eminently useful an ally that, had it not been for his son-in-law Miles Denton's prior claim, Mr. Villars would no doubt have made him a partner; but he felt he had no right to encumber his estate for his grandchildren. Jones's pay was liberal, and the little man had recently deserted the rooms over the counting-house, and gone in for housekeeping on his own account in quite a gorgeous manner. He caused it to be understood that he was a marrying man if he could find a young lady with sufficient money to justify him in changing his estate; and it is wonderful what an effect such an announcement has in gaining importance for a man, however contemptible he may be

in himself. Jones gave some of the cosiest bachelor dinners in Sturminster, and everybody said what a mistake it was that George Villars had not another daughter to bestow on that estimable little factotum of his. Some, indeed—and these were the people whom Mr. McLachlan had trained to be Dissenters in embryo—added openly, that Ethel would have been much better off as Mrs. Oliver Jones than as tied up to the Combe Dean curate. However, Ethel was then disposed of, and Mr. Jones must look elsewhere. He was looking.

He had struck up quite a friendship with Squire Atkins, and it was between these two interesting bachelors that there occurred another disquisition on the fertile and apparently inexhaustible subject of Platonic Love. Atkins had dropped in to smoke a pipe with Oliver Jones, and they were talking over things in general, when the host brought Claude Vallance's name to the front.

"Wonderful hit that old curate of ours, Vallance, has made, hasn't he?"

"Confound him, yes."

"Ah, you don't like him any better than I do. In fact he cut us both out, didn't he?"

"My own stupidity made me hang back from Clara Thornton, and while I was hesitating he came on the scene, and made her Mrs. Vallance."

"While at the same time he was carrying on, and *is* carrying on still—with Ada Parkinson, the little minx I was weak-minded enough to be spoony on once."

"Was carrying on, yes ; but how do you mean '*is*' carrying on ? Where is she ?"

"In London—Brompton, and they're flirting like old Boots."

"Who?"

"Who? why Vallance and Ada Parkinson."

"The deuce they are !" said the usually phlegmatic squire, becoming all at once interested in the narrative.

"I've watched 'em myself spooning in the cemetery ; and I get accounts regularly from

a person in my employ in London. I keep a many such sometimes. I find they're meeting daily, and he's holding a sort of private conventicle with a dozen old women and other harmless lunatics."

"And Mrs. Vallance?"

"Is in blissful ignorance of both, carrying on *her* little game with the Aborigines."

Mr. Atkins jumped up and patting Jones on the shoulder, said—

"My dear fellow, I wouldn't have missed this information for fifty pounds."

"Wouldn't you. I wish you'd mentioned that first. I'd have had the money down."

"I'll utilise this knowledge against Mr. Claude Vallance, or know the reason why."

"You'll wait till you have my authority, if you please. You can't stir far in this matter without me, and a false move at first may spoil the game. We've acted before together, when we moved on Mr. Vallance from his curacy here. If we'd only been a bit more systematic then we might have

snuffed him out more successfully, and saved ourselves a deal of trouble now."

"What do you propose, then?"

"Well, I don't want either of us to initiate this. Of course, I know your little game, as I daresay you guess mine. You want to get round Mrs. Vallance. My motive is only tit for tat. I've outgrown my spoony fit, but I do just want one smite under Mr. Vallance's fifth rib both for cutting me out and for another little matter in which he's crossed me."

Oliver Jones then imparted in detail to the attentive ear of the Squire both the meeting in the cemetery and the previous mock marriage in Combe Dean church.

"And you mean to say you've held both these trump cards all this time without playing them?"

"When you've only two trumps I doubt the policy of leading off with them. Mine's a cautious game—a waiting race. I shall get some more trumps before long."

"In the meantime——"

"In the meantime I should uncommonly like for Mr. Villars to have some little inkling of this new move on the board. I shouldn't like it to come formally or officially before him from you or me, but for him to hear of it casually."

"How will you manage that?"

"Nothing easier. I'll tell Tabitha Tart in confidence—beg her not to mention it. If you want to set a report spinning through a parish, tell the veriest old cat you know confidentially ; it's done."

"Capital ! when do you break cover?"

"This very night. I'll go up and have tea with Tabitha. She thinks I'm sweet on her. Fancy that. That's another of my devices. Never mind the pretty girls—that is not for business purposes. Get the cod-eyed old gorgons on your side if you want to make way."

"Upon my life you're a wonderfully clever fellow, Jones."

"Have you lived so many years in these parts and only just found that out? Put

on your hat and walk with me as far as Tabitha's on your way home, and I'll post you up in some more details of the coming campaign. It will be a hot one, I can tell you, when I do open fire."

So well and conscientiously did Miss Tart do her work, and such a capital medium was Sturminster for a report to percolate through, that George Villars heard, the very next day, to his intense annoyance, that Claude and Ada had met in London, and were "going on dreadfully," without Mrs. Claude's knowledge. He could easily make business in town, and would go up and look about him on the following day. He did; and by the same train went Squire Atkins, on a little secret mission of his own too.

"Ah, Mr. Villars," he said, feigning a surprise he was far from feeling; "off to London, eh?"

"Yes. I'm running up to see my daughters and sons-in-law. What with the

paper and the branch business I'm in town pretty well every week now."

"And a nice change too. I often wish I could persuade myself to go oftener. I'm just running up to brush the cobwebs away."

"Will you come to Portland Place? I can give you a shakedown."

"No, thanks; when I do go to town I travel incog., put up at a Covent Garden Hotel, and give no account of my movements to anybody."

"Sly dog! It's well there's no Mrs. Atkins to ask questions."

Mr. Atkins did not go to Covent Garden, but bowled off in a hansom to Brompton, as soon as he arrived in town, and engaged a lodging in a house commanding a full view of the cemetery. He was bent on a little counterplot of his own; and all he had been able to pump out of Jones, by the most diligent cross-questioning, was the sepulchral meeting-place of Claude and Ada. He took his cue from that.

By the train next to that which conveyed George Villars and the Squire, Oliver Jones travelled up to town too. It was contrary to his practice to leave the brewery and newspaper-office at the same time with his principal, but both were well officered, and he felt that this business would not brook delay. He was going to act the spy on Mr. Atkins.

As fate would have it, however, the visits of Claude and Ada to the cemetery were now very few and far between indeed. It was winter, and the locality was not inviting, while the oratory formed their more appropriate rendezvous. The consequence was that, after nearly catching his death of cold, and being suspected by the attendants at the cemetery of being an escaped lunatic, Squire Atkins was about to vacate his lodging and travel home again, when he ran full butt against Oliver Jones. Escape was impossible, and explanation out of the question, so Mr. Atkins simply looked foolish, and Oliver saw his opportunity.

"Vastly clever, friend Atkins!" he commenced, in his most sarcastic tone. "Vastly clever! You thought to steal a march on me, did you? Plot and counterplot—is that to be the order of the day?"

"I really only wanted to satisfy myself that you were not mistaken in this matter."

"And a lot of good you've done, haven't you? I could have told you such would be the case. Is it likely they would meet here now, when they have other places? And I've got the addresses here, Mr. Atkins; I've got the addresses!" and he patted his pocket-book derisively.

"Let us act together, Jones."

"No, I thank you. I see what your move is. You want to outwit me; and yet I thought you discovered only last week what a clever fellow I was. I am too clever to be taken in by you, Mr. Atkins!" continued the little man, waxing warm, and seeing that Atkins was at his mercy. "Now thwart me in this; blow upon this scheme of mine, and I will make you look more

foolish than ever you did before, and that's saying a good deal. I'll put you in such a fix that you shall never dare show your face in Portland Place again. Take my advice, and go back to Sturminster at once. This game is beyond you. Leave it to me, and you will see it will all come right."

And the Squire did go back to Sturminster that very evening, like a dog with its tail between its legs. Oliver Jones had been clearly one too many for him.

By the dim firelight in the room over the little oratory were two figures arranged very much in the fashion of Abelard and Heloise. Claude Vallance, in his cassock, having concluded evening service, was sitting in his Glastonbury chair, and Ada on a stool at his feet, was telling him for the twentieth time that story he never tired of hearing, how her heart first yearned towards him; when she first guessed what he felt for her, and how happy the knowledge made her; how she looked forward to nothing else than that he should stay at Combe Dean as curate

for ever. She was so thoroughly contented that she could picture no greater happiness.

“And in the long dark days when we were separated,” she continued, “I lived on this. “Some people say we cannot live on the past; but I proved it then. If it had not been for those dear recollections, and the happier one still conjured up by this ring, I am sure I could not have lived through those weary weary weeks and months. We had hard times; I must tell you soon how hard they were, and what made them so. I hate to think there is any secret between us. I shall victimise you one day ere long with papa’s story—*our* story. I suppose I ought not to tell it; but then I am doing so many things that I ought not. Of course I ought not to be here, and I ought not to love you; but I do, O so dearly.”

It was not often Ada talked on her own account, but when she did it was rapture to Claude. He dared not by a single word break the charmed speech. She went on—

"Besides this great longing I have that there should be absolutely no secrets between us, I feel the constant desire that nothing may ever occur to spoil the romance of our position—for it is romantic, is it not? I would die rather than that any weakness, any petty quarrel—I don't mean between us, but between our belongings—should mar this sweet dream. I pray for this, and I don't think I could pray—I do not think I should be *let* pray, if there were any anything wrong in our association."

"You call it over-sensitiveness, I know—this constant asking, Is it wrong? can it be wrong?" for Claude has smiled as if in deprecation of her last remark, though he still spoke no word; "but I cannot help sometimes taking myself to task as to whether I have the right thus to have stolen away your heart; and yet," she still continued, arguing with herself, as though put upon her defence by an adversary, "it was mine originally both by right of free gift

and the contract of that prior marriage;
and——”

“And it is all to come right in time, is it not?”

“All to come right in time,” she replied;
“or, if not, in eternity.”

“In sæcula sæculorum. Amen!”





CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTAIN PARKINSON'S ROMANCE.

IN pursuance of their mutual wish that there should be no secrets at all between them, Claude and Ada arranged a special occasion when she should tell, and he hear, the details of her papa's strange eventful history. From the earliest time when Claude had met the Captain at Sturminster and Combe Dean, he felt there was a degree of mystery attaching to the old man's residence in that retired spot; and the particulars communicated to him at a certain memorable dinner, and with an accompaniment of Chopin and Mendelssohn, rather deepened than satisfied his curiosity. What he did learn at that epoch and from the Captain's own mouth was as follows, and Ada only lightly glanced over it in her

narrative, just to post Claude up to the time when her morespecial revelation was to begin.

“The only son of a landed proprietor in quite another corner of Clodshire from where we are now assembled,” the Captain had then said, “I was brought up at a public school, and subsequently in a very brief sojourn at one of the universities—I prefer not to mention which—with a sort of general idea that I was both omnipotent and omniscient, prejudices which are I believe not uncommon with the Alcibiades, the *jeunesse dorée* of any age. I had ample resources, splendid health, was—so the girls told me, not in words but deeds—tolerably good looking, and life was before me. Of course I made an ass of myself.

“I do not know that I possessed any of the pleasant vices of humanity in an inordinate degree. I distributed my favours pretty generally among the lot. I neither drank, smoked, nor flirted to excess, though I did a good deal in each of those branches of business. My great penchant, though,

was for any game that combined chance with skill. I had no objection to tempting pure chance occasionally, and, especially at college, my losses at blind hooky were sometimes heavy; but I flatter myself I had a little too much headpiece to be altogether seduced by games of pure chance. If I had possessed the great advantage of comparative poverty and had to earn my own living, it is very possible my genius might have taken a mathematical turn, and made me a Senior Wrangler or First Classman in Mathematical and Physical Science (I have elected to conceal my Alma Mater). As it was, I was rich, and stopped short at billiards and unlimited loo.

“ My father—peace to his ashes—not only had done the same before me, but did it contemporaneously too. He had married prematurely, and was still a young man when I attained my adolescence. So unlike was he to the ordinary papa of stage life or real experience that, instead of being hard upon me for my similarity to himself, as those

ideal papas are, he gloried in seeing himself reproduced in his son, and actually introduced me to fast life in its every phase. My mother died at my birth, so there was no counterpoise to his influence, and when father and son made their first appearance in the then little low supper-room at Evans's Hotel, the habitués joked my father about being attended by the shadow of himself, as he used to be twenty years ago. When we broke up after a jovial evening, I had so astonished the weak minds of the old birds by my precocity, that I was immensely flattered by hearing them observe, 'Arcades ambo! like father, like son!' I had no greater ambition than to be like my father, for he was a polished gentleman, as thoughtless as a schoolboy and exactly the model a hare-brained youth as I was then, would propose for himself.

"So things went on for a series of jovial years. We rode to cover, shot, and fished together in Clodshire; and, when the season required it of us, adjourned to London and

went the pace. We were the terror of Baden croupiers, the admired of all admirers in Pantton and Jermyn Streets. We were open-handed, and I believe I may say so without lack of modesty, open-hearted. We never did anybody any injury willingly—except ourselves.

“I have said I made an ass of myself. When I use that expression I quote what the world said ; but the world did not say it, mark you, of this sowing of my wild oats as it euphemistically termed my precocious escapades. The world is remarkably tender on such subjects. As a rule it deals gently with us gilded youth. It was only when I made what it was pleased to call a *mésalliance* that it called me an ass. It called my dear wife—her mother yonder—harder names than that. Curse its Pharisaism.”

The old man was silent, and his eyes grew moist for a moment at this juncture in his story.

“A troop of strolling players came to the university town where I was an alumnus, and—to cut a long story short—she who became my wife was the soubrette of the

company, a merry creature, as full of animal spirits as myself, and who had been brought up for the stage by the diatribes of a Puritanical papa against everything theatrical—there is no better feeder for the boards than this promiscuous abuse of them. The University authorities fell into the grievous mistake of forbidding the presence of undergraduates at the theatre, because they had heard rumours of champagne luncheons and general good fellowship with the *corps dramatique*. The consequence was that the manager, who would simply have been ruined without the patronage of the students, allowed us to go behind the curtain instead of in front, and we saved gates by leaving at half play, when necessary. Those who were not obliged to be so scrupulous generally extended the bill of the play after the audience had gone by detaining the orchestra, and having an extempore bal masqué on the stage. The pit used to be full of bulldogs, and I have seen my own servant gazing serenely on me as I stood at

the wings talking to my innamorata, but they were not bound to see us officially, and so were voluntarily smitten with judicial—or judicious—blindness.

“I was a popular man in the first set at my crack college, and there was grievous fear lest I should “make an ass of myself” in the matter of the pretty soubrette. My bosom friend protested with me in that very phraseology, and I feel my biceps grow young again as I remember how I prostrated him, and requested him to speak of a lady as she deserved. It was in open quad, and the matter made a scandal, so I went down incontinently without going through the process of taking my name off the books or giving the dons the opportunity to expel or rusticate me. At the same time I most unwillingly injured the worthy manager by bearing off with me his pretty soubrette.

“When at length, after a somewhat extended honeymoon, during which my father of course fancied I was safe at college, I went to Clodshire, I really felt alarmed

lest we should have had our first quarrel. As a man of the world I was quite sure my father would endorse the world's maxim that I had made an ass of myself. I knew so well what I should have said of others that I was quite prepared to hear my father echo the general opinion in this respect. I left my wife at the hotel therefore, while I went home and made a clean breast of my college escapade and its connubial sequel. 'Exactly what I should have done under the circumstances, my boy,' he said, 'and now present me to your wife. It's the first time I ever felt inclined to quarrel with you, you dog, as I do now for not having sufficient confidence in me to bring your wife straight to your home, you rascal, which is of course her home. What, did you think I should want to choose your wife for you, like Sir Antony Absolute, or any of the old stock-comedy papas? However you give me the opportunity of paying my *devoirs* to your wife instead of waiting for her to call on me. I'll have a suite of apartments

got ready for her at once, and we'll get the horses put to and drive down to the hotel.'

"When he got there and found my poor little soubrette in an agony of anticipation as to what our reception would be, I thought I never saw anything so graceful as his profoundly polite salutation of her. If she had been a duchess he could not have welcomed her more warmly; and I never loved him half so well before as when he said, 'Charlie, it's exactly what I should have done under the circumstances.' Whether he was only adapting himself to events in a happy optimism or not, I could not tell. He never gave us the slightest reason to suppose that such was the case. In fact, the few years of married life I passed beneath my father's roof were even happier—ah, and jollier too—than those we had passed as bachelor and widower. Fanny—that was my wife's name—settled down naturally and at once as a member of our little household and somewhat exclusive circle of friends,

and when I shifted my ménage to Dale House in anticipation of Ada's birth, it was quite against the dear old man's wish, who protested that a baby would not be the least in his way, and that the expense of two establishments was unnecessary.

"I did not understand the import of his latter words, but one day, very soon after the dismemberment of our households, I was astonished by his driving up to Dale House in his dog-cart, and saying as he sat down in this room, 'I have sold the old place on the quiet, and come to end my days with you, Fanny and Ada. You've no idea—I'd no idea—how we had been making the money go these few years. The old place was encumbered up to the ears. You've lost nothing by its going. I've kept enough to render me not a burden to you for the rest of my days, and to buy you a commission if you like, though I doubt whether a married officer's life would be quite in your line.' This was the only way in which my

matrimonial alliance had proved a difficulty with my father. 'We two could have pulled through anyhow,' he used to say. 'There's always billiard playing, or even marking, as a last resource. But the women—there are two now—complicate the business, and I want to look ahead for their sakes.' We were still as one; each of us reformed characters, steady papa and grandfather now!

"The dear old boy had literally come to end his days with us, as he said. He died within the year, and my wife followed him very shortly to the old churchyard yonder. I got an elderly relative to come and act duenna for Ada, for I scarcely felt equal to the superintendence of my daughter's infancy and childhood. I bought my commission, and remained in the army long enough to obtain my captaincy, when I retired on halfpay. The income, I need not tell you, was insufficient for us to live upon, simple as our life is here; but I added a commercial pursuit *sub rosâ*, as it

had even then begun to be the fashion to do, and—voilà tout ! Here we are.”

This was as far as the Captain's own narrative had gone ; and really there seemed no reason why Ada should amplify it with any further revelations.

“ Perhaps it is selfish in me, Claude,” she used to say, “ to want to tell you things about papa which it is very likely he would rather you did not know ; but it seems so utterly loathsome to me that there should be any one secret you do not know, any one corner of my breast you have not ransacked, that I cannot refrain from enlightening you. At the same time there is nothing very romantic to relate, though there is a skeleton in the cupboard, as I believe you say there generally is, don't you ? ”

“ Generally a bone or two, at all events.”

“ Well, here are my dry bones for your acceptance. I think you ought to inspect them ; for I am not sure that you will care to continue my acquaintance when you know them.”

“Extremely probable that I shall not. Is it prudent to venture on the narration? Sydney Smith, I think, when people used to brag of their ancestry, said his grandfather disappeared once about the time of the assizes, and they felt it was better to ask no questions as to what had become of him. Yours seems to have gone to his grave respectably, or at all events without the intervention of judge and jury.”

Not noticing the badinage Ada proceeded, looking wonderfully serious the while.

“Papa spoke of certain commercial transactions in which he was—and, I may add, is still engaged.”

“And you think I shall shy at commerce? My father sold diluted logwood juice and called it port wine.”

“Supposing the expression ‘commerce’ were only a poetical licence.”

“Covering the real pursuit of billiard marking. Then I should rise up and leave you forthwith, saying ‘No, Miss Parkinson,

not billiard-marking. I can stand a good deal, but not that. I have the honour to wish you a very good morning.' "

"It was not—is not—billiard-marking, or playing, but it is bill-discounting."

"And a very nice profitable line of business too, my dear Ada, eminently superior to dramatic authorship or journalism, even—as McLachlan would say, 'from a worldly point of view,' more successful than sermonizing. The only marvel is your excellent papa has not feathered his nest better. There never was more bill-discounting done than at the present moment. Society is existing on post-obits."

"Certainly papa has *not* feathered his nest. That was why he was so anxious for me to marry money. He had a chivalrous notion that, in his riotous youth, he had spent the resources which should be mine now, consequently he stooped to practices from which, as a thorough gentleman—you know him to be that, do you not, dear Claude?"

“To the very soul a gentleman.”

“As a thorough gentleman he would have stood aloof. Whilst in the army he became acquainted with a certain long firm, as he terms them, who do an immense business among young officers and University men, and who wished to extend their operations into the rural districts. Consequently, they got some needy gentleman of position, influence, &c.,—above all, talents—in each county to promote their business for them, allowing him a liberal commission, besides a fixed salary. For a long time Clodshire was one of the best centres, and papa saved some money; but business, he says, is done very differently now. They cut down his income, and eventually—just in the nick of time to spoil our plans, dear Claude, ordered him to shift his quarters to Boulogne, which has always been a favourite spot with them. Now he is superannuated; and the income the firm allows him is so small, that he is——”

"More than ever anxious for you to marry money, I suppose."

"No; he has grown out of that delusion, I think. He fancied I should attract one of the young aristocrats who were his clients, I think; but he made such a ruinous mistake about you that he says he feels old before his time—he is really quite a young man, comparatively speaking—and that he is no longer qualified to judge of the value of an investment."

"And is that how he speaks of your love, Ada?"

"He did. His one aim and object in life was to make up for me what he had squandered in his youth, and he looked on a rich husband as the easiest method. Now he finds out you would have been a rich husband, he is angry with himself for not being more far-sighted; since, as he says, he could have consulted my interests and inclination at the same time."

"That's all he knows about it, is it not?"

He fancies you are fond of me. Egregious blunder, is it not?"

"And now I am at a loss what to do," she continued. "I should like to tell him I have seen you—am seeing you so often. Sometimes I think he suspects, though he never says a word, never mentions your name. I do not like to have to deceive him as I often have to when I want to steal away to you. Not only so, but he liked you so much and wants some society, but——"

"But what, Ada?"

"But I am sure he would not approve of our constant meetings, Claude. He could not understand us unless he knew of our previous marriage, and he would be sure ——"

"To pass the judgment all the world would pass, perhaps does pass."

"Do you think so, Claude? do you think the world, the little world that we move in, points the finger at me?"

"I should like to see it!" replied Claude, fiercely. "I would soon leave it no finger

to point with. Is not society, in this respect, thoroughly represented by some Tabitha Tart? The principle of English justice, which supposes innocence until guilt is proved, is reversed in this one instance—our instance, Ada. Guilt is always presupposed. We have only our own consciences to clear us.”

“Then you think people do talk?”

“Do donkeys bray? If, as you say, we could put all the facts before them, our previous marriage, irregular though it was, the damnable act of intercepting your letters, and so beguiling me to think you false, then even society might hold you scatheless. I do not care for its judgment on myself. But when does society judge except on imperfect evidence, and then on that pronounce its infallible—or at all events its unquestionable—judgment? No,” he continued, “it would be no use—or I think not—for me to seek your father’s friendship again, though I should like, above all things, for your sake, that our association should be open and above

suspicion. But then that would at once involve the acquaintance with my wife, which would, as you know, ruin all—will ruin it one day. She dared not associate with you, knowing what has taken place. When I think of it, Ada, my determinations resolve themselves into one significant monosyllable."

"Can I guess it?"

"Bolt."

"Yes, but——"

"But it is not to be thought of. You have a duty to your father and yourself, however I may be situated."

"Dear Claude, you always think of me."

"Who in the wide world have I to think of else? Oh! Ada, when I contemplate myself thus fettered and shackled, yet growing every day and hour in my love for you, I feel as though I must do something rash to burst my bonds asunder. If you stood free I should almost dare to say, Let us go together to a new world, far from all who have ever known us, and be as we really are,

all in all to each other. Are we not, Ada?"

"Never more than at this wonderful time. Were ever lovers so circumstanced before, I wonder?"

"The course of true love never did run smooth, of course; but I really am sometimes puzzled to think what grievous sin we can have committed that ours should go so uncommonly crooked. And yet, as I have said (how I keep on saying the same things to you), I do not think I could wish it otherwise. Can you picture me, Ada, offering to rock the basinette while you ran across the road at Combe Dean to carry some broth to that disagreeable old Mrs. Fielding? or writing my sermon at Dale House while you darned my grey worsted stockings, which were almost past redemption—past damnation, so to say?"

"Could you not have borne even that with me, Claude?"

"That is not the question, small sophist. The question is whether this irregular affec-

tion of ours, as Mrs. Grundy would term it, is not, on the known principle that stolen sweets are the most enjoyed, preferable to baby-jumping and sermon-writing at Combe Dean. Determine."

"I cannot. I lose my power of judgment when I am with you. I can only say this seems so delicious that I cannot imagine anything more so."

"I can."

"Dissatisfied grumbler, what?"

"Unbroken association all day long, and every day——"

"It is pretty well every day, if not all day, now. Well, what else do you want?"

"No such word in our vocabulary as Good-night."

"And then I wonder what next?"

"Après ça, not the deluge, but the development into a higher sphere, where, the irksome restrictions of the flesh quite laid aside, the twin spirits should be for ever what they can only be by fits and starts,

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and in rare moments of exaltation here, utterly and indissolubly one!"

"For ever. Would you not tire?"

"True love knows no satiety. It is only the counterfeit—the 'contract' article—that wears out in the using."

It was such a genial afternoon of very early spring which they chose for their colloquy that they had it in the open air instead of at the oratory, and so interested had they been in it that they had not noticed a lean and slippered pantaloon hovering about and around them during its progress. He joined them when they had quite concluded, and said very quietly—

"Ada, my dear. Mr. Claude Vallance, I believe. You are altered, sir, since the Combe Dean days. We are all of us altered, I suppose, for I perceive you scarcely recognise me."

"It is papa," said Ada, very softly.

"Captain Parkinson! A thousand pardons. For the moment I did not recognise you."

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"Time has not been so kind to me as to you, Mr. Vallance. So you and my daughter have met——"

"Yes, papa, once or twice——"

"Indeed, child ; you never told me."

"No, I did not. I scarcely know why."

"I do though. The past has been disagreeable. Would it not be as well to forget it?"

"I can have no wish to remember it, sir," answered Claude. "It was cruel to me."

"Yet you are married and prosperous——"

"Ah!" That interjection spoke volumes.

"What. All is not gold that glitters?"

"Claude—I mean Mr. Vallance—did not say so, papa. I have been giving him a few particulars of your romantic history. I thought, as an old friend, you would like him to know them."

"As an old friend, yes. I can have no objection ; but it seems so strange you never mentioned having seen Mr. Vallance," he added, in quite a childish tone of voice. "I heard you telling my story, and thought I

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would not interrupt you until it was all over."

Both Claude and Ada wondered how much besides the story he had heard. He gave no sign, however, of anything more startling than Claude's sudden re-appearance having occurred to him; and he looked so simple, and almost imbecile, that it was next to impossible he could be acting a part.

When they got to the door of the shabby-genteel stuccoed lodging-house, close to which Claude had so often escorted Ada, Captain Parkinson, with a relic of his old hospitality, begged him to enter. He did so, and was scarcely able to realise the fact that they were all together once more under such altered circumstances from those which surrounded them at Dale House. A "tea-dinner" was awaiting them, and Claude stayed awhile to partake of their frugal meal before going down to his office for evening work. Not a word was said about the services, nor was the name of Mrs. Vallance once mentioned, or any but the faintest

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allusion made to Sturminster and Combe Dean.

"Perhaps now Mr. Vallance knows all the strange eventful history, it will be of no use to ask him to call again," said Captain Parkinson, as Claude rose to go ; "but I am sure we shall both be very glad to see him, shall we not, Ada?"

Ada smiled assent, while the guest promised an early visit ; and as she went to the door with Claude, she whispered, "Is he not altered ? I am so glad you have met. Can you not understand I do not like leaving him for long, or practising any deceit on him in his present state?"

"Quite, darling," was Claude's reply ; and straightway, with a not uncommon inconsistency, he added, "Twelve o'clock service to-morrow at the oratory."

The Fools' Paradise had now a paternal element in it ; and when Claude, having got his work over betimes at office, and just looked in upon the Aborigines in passing, returned to his splendid mansion in Port-

land Place, where Clara was entertaining Miles Denton and Emily *en famille*, he could not help envying even the squalid little Brompton lodging-house where he had eaten his oleaginous chop for high tea, as he contrasted it with the gorgeous surroundings of his domestic hearth. After all, it is the people, not the place, that make the difference. Love in a cottage may sound romantic enough ; but indifference in an "eligible family mansion with every convenience" is dreadfully the reverse.

"Guess what Clodshire people I met in town to-day," said Claude.

"The governor?" suggested Miles.

"Tabitha Tart?" said Emily, at a venture.

"Who?" asked Mrs. Vallance. "I hate guessing. Who was it?"

"The Parkinsons."

Clara said not one word; and only the shade of a sinister expression passed over her face. All saw it, however, and Claude knew the silence was ominous. The young people did not recur to the subject; and

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Claude, to change it, asked Emily how her spasms were getting on. He alluded, not to any bodily infirmity, but to her poems, which he declared to be of the ultra spasmodic school.

"Swinburne has a deal to answer for, Emily," he said. "He has turned you into a generation of Sapphos. What business have you to write about "Kissing her Chignon," or "Songs before the Small Hours?" It's plagiarism, you know, and I must say so in my review. The book will inevitably come into my hands for criticism, and I really cannot allow family considerations to interfere with my duty to the British public."

"Interfere with her spasms," rejoined Miles, "and I will poison your next nine-gallon cask of Stomachic Ale, and pay you out in kind."

"*Similia similibus!*"

Even when all was quiet, and the season for certain lecture had come and gone, the

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Parkinsons were never mentioned ; and Claude rightly augured the worst from Clara's silence. It was the lull before the storm ; and the tempest, they each of them felt, might burst upon them at any moment without warning. So they waited.



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CHAPTER IX.

THE RIFT SLOWLY WIDENING.

AS if by tacit but mutual consent, Claude and Ada came earlier than usual to the oratory on the ensuing day, to talk over the events of the previous evening.

"I am glad papa and you have met," said Ada, as soon as they had settled themselves in the little room, half study, half vestry, over the chapel. "I noticed how shocked you were to see him. The change has come more gradually on me, but still I perceive it, and I do not think he will be with us long. It is such a comfort to me to know you have shaken hands, and that there was no reference to old grievances."

"Your father is very much altered, Ada; but I scarcely think it is necessary to speak

of him thus, almost in the past tense. It is well to be prepared for the possible evils of life, but not to anticipate them too morbidly. Life would be miserable under such circumstances."

"And yet, Clande, you may be sure I must sometimes look anxiously forward and think what should I do in the event of poor papa's death? His small pension dies with him; and I am so utterly friendless, with the exception of yourself."

"But I am a friend big enough for two or three such wee things as you; and my plans are all cut and dried for you. I mean you to give up this pupilising, which is mill-horse kind of work at the best, and to take to literary life."

"Literary life! Why you know I never wrote a sentence beyond an ordinary letter in my life."

"No matter. The first English novels were written in the epistolary form. It would be a good idea to go back to the style of Richardson. What say you to

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opening with 'The New Pamela; or, Virtue in a Panier and Chignon?' "

" Claude !"

" Seriously though, I find this, I can do work enough for two or three people. I often send sufficient to one magazine for three or four numbers, and they say we would gladly print it all at one fell swoop; but we must have varieties in the names."

" But what has this to do with me ?"

" Everything. You shall be one of my names. I shall straightway adopt a strictly moral and religious *nom de plume*. That name, and all it produces will be yours."

" Claude, do you think I would consent to appropriate the result of your work ?"

" Well yes, I rather think you would, and will. There are two reasons, each connected with a certain little event in Combe Dean church. In the first place, I promised to endow you with all my worldly goods. I suppose every man is bound to provide for his wife, even if there be no family; in the second place, you, on your

part, promised to obey me, and I command you—sternly—to be henceforth no more known in the world of letters as Ada Parkinson.”

“I am not known already.”

“Then never be known but as Cecile Valens. The initials will be the same, and the name sound sufficiently like my own for me to answer to it, when I have to receive a large cheque for you from the publishers. Not a word. It is arranged. Any dissertation on this point between us would be simply ridiculous. Take this poem, this tale, this article; copy, and send them according to their endorsements. I will see they are not declined with thanks; and you will find this new writer, “who is already on the staff of so many first-class magazines and periodicals,” will be particularly well-spoken of in the notices of current literature. Many reputations have been made by such a fluke. What is the use of having friends at court if you do not avail yourself of them?”

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"O thanks!"

"Now please don't. Whatever we do, never let us utter one unreality, or talk stilted words to one another. I am quite certain that you yourself could produce far better stuff than what I have given you, if you only had the confidence—which, being interpreted, means the impudence—to sit down and try. You will find the copying ten times more irksome than original composition. It is your apprenticeship to your new craft. Now, put that bundle away, and let us arrange the music for service."

The house which contained Claude's oratory was in a dingy street of west central London. It was a humble inexpensive place enough, maintained by his own resources and the contributions of the very few who worshipped there. Flower Fielding, the poor girl who had been sent up from Combe Dean to London by Claude's help, under circumstances already detailed, was installed as guardian of the house. She could not feel at ease under any ministrations but

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Claude's. He had preached to her the Gospel not of words but of deeds. There was another link that bound her to him besides. Her child, like his, was dead; and they often used to discuss together the mystery of these early removals. There are no such links as those which are woven impalpably around the living by the hands of the dead. Most of those who attended the irregular services at the oratory were persons who had thus in some way or another come under Claude's individual influence. He had great personal power in private as well as in the pulpit. He would have made a capital father confessor as well as a successful preacher if he could have narrowed his range of vision so far as to fall in with the position of the Ritualistic cultus.

The system embodied at the oratory was a sort of recoil from Positivism, and many of those who attended had once been disciples in the Comtist School. It was, in fact, an attempt to represent Comte in

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his so-called madness, rather than his alleged sanity. His sacramental Broad Churchism Claude based on actual experience, and reduced to demonstration. He appealed to the sensible effects of good communion. What he asked was the daily life of the early Christian commune? It was symbolized in the breaking of bread, not in the singing of matins or evensong. It was the consecration, the making a sacrament of social and domestic life. Here was the sphere of miracle, which, he argued, you could not gainsay unless you set aside all testimony. What miracle—so-called—could not even now be accomplished by faith, by men's strong belief in themselves or in one another? There was more, far more, in these effects of communion than could be accounted for by mere commemoration, association, or the genius loci.

Let us analyse for one moment somewhat more closely the congregation and the service.

Yonder man of commerce, who has con-

trived to steal in for half an hour at the busiest time of a week-day, and who is by no means singular—there are half a dozen like him—represents fairly enough the practical intellect of the day, confessing its own unrest, its aspiration for self-forgetfulness, and finding it, beyond a doubt, in this commemorative rite—call it no more. Here are twice as many women, not of the sort who trail in droves after a curate's cassock-tails, work slippers, and twist wreaths, but strong-minded women, as satirists termed them, women who write in newspapers and reviews, yet who come and forget their strong-mindedness in this simple service, presided over by a brother in their craft. That brother, whatever else he might do, did not either simper or dogmatise. Some of these have seceded from the School of the Sceptics, but have preserved the secret of the oratory, so far, as jealously as though they had been a lodge of freemasons. Why have we no female lodges in these progressive days? Add six or seven less likely

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personages, whom one would have sooner expected to see in an orthodox church, but whose presence was due to that occult personal influence already adverted to—and the congregation was resolved into its constituent parts.

The Lord's Prayer and Collect for Purity, followed by the Beatitudes with a Kyrie sung to a simple air, led on to the Offertory and Prayer of Consecration. Then the elements were administered with the following words only—

Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee.

Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee.

The prayer for "those who have duly received," and the first portion only of the Gloria in Excelsis—which gave something of an Unitarian character to the whole arrangement—led on to the Apostolic Benediction, and this closed the service.

Sometimes Claude added a very brief address. He did so on the present occasion.

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His subject was "Labouring with the Hands." He was inclined to doubt the necessity of a priestly caste. His own ministrations were, he confessed, carried on rather in spite than in consequence of his ordination vows. Why? Principally, it seemed to him, because the clerical and secular works were looked upon by those in authority as incompatible, and also because being ordained a priest—valeat tantum—as well as born a reasonable being, he declined to accept the dictum of another priest, albeit that priest was surnamed or called in addition prelate, on a question or questions of morals. He claimed that his conscience was as sensitive as any man's. He judged not others: he demanded to be exempt from judgment at their hands, except in so far as any error of practice on his part might interfere with the good of the community. There he based his standard, not on any dogmatic definitions of right and wrong, which varied, as matters of fact, with every one who used those definitions.

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This Labour of the Hands, leaving a margin for spiritual work with head and heart, had goodly precedents. Paul and his fellow tentmakers ought, he opined, to have removed any possible stigma from such a fusion of the sacred and secular, the spiritual and materialistic. Who could fix the shadowy frontier where the two met? Was it not rather the object of life to blend than dissociate them? The ancient Hebrews were a nation of priests; was not the separation of the Levi-caste in addition a superfluity? What else, in reference to Christianity, meant the merging of the Aaronic priesthood in that of Melchizedek! What the work of those long long years in the carpenter's consecrated shed at Nazareth?

Although the secret of the oratory had been thus masonically kept, yet was Mrs. Claude Vallance quite sure that her sacerdotal spouse, as she deemed him, had found some outlet for his sympathies since he had deserted the School of the Sceptics, and that energetic lady at once acted out the moral of

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the sermon quoted above by labouring with hands and head to discover what was the special form his eccentricity had now assumed. The fact of his having met the Parkinsons filled her with a vague alarm; not, of course, that she associated that circumstance with his possible ecclesiastical developments. Her woman's acumen did not give her so deep an insight into truth as that; but she felt sure that, if any explanation ensued between Claude and Ada, her doom was sealed. For to her the day that saw her influence over her husband decline would be the day of doom. She might pretend to despise his priestliness, and so depreciate himself. But she did nothing of the kind; that element she knew was not the most distinctive in his character, and not the one that had at first attracted her. It was rather the reverse, rather the absence of the parsonic brand upon his brow, the matured secular intellect, she admired. That again was why she dreaded his meeting with Ada at the time when the sacer-

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dotal element seemed prominent in him. It was that which formed the link between those two. She was just the girl to be attracted by the fascinations of a curate. Clara's own pride as well as her love rose up in rebellion, and when those two motive-powers prompt a woman to action what will she not accomplish?

What she did first of all was to hunt up her catspaw, Oliver Jones. "Why does not that contemptible little creature come to town when he's wanted?" she asked, pettishly, and like a big spoilt child, as though there were some magnetic bond between them, and he was bound to obey the impulses of her supreme will. That he was so bound when she deigned to make them known, Clara had no manner of doubt; but now she seemed to think he ought to anticipate them. Those aspiring pigmies who are linked, as so often is the case, with Amazons in the bonds of Hymen must have a dreadful time of it. The only sort of compensation kind nature gives these diminutive folk

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is an overweening sense of their own importance; but as no man is a hero to his valet, so no small husband can possibly be heroic when subjected to a Caudle lecture by an abnormally developed better half, who is not a better half only, but a better three-quarters or seven-eighths at the very least.

She wrote as follows, after finding that protestations in soliloquy were likely to do no good in bringing Oliver Jones to town:—

“Burn this, when read. Claude has met the Parkinsons. Come to town immediately, and bring your agreement in your pocket.”

“I’ll come to town,” said Jones to himself, as he read the characteristic document in his smug sanctum, “and I’ll bring the agreement, if you like; but I don’t burn this, Mrs. Vallance. It may be useful one of these days;” and he locked it in one of the drawers of his Wardour Street writing-table. That is a favourite method with

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your parvenu for assuming self-importance; he surrounds himself with costly and out-of-the-way furniture, as though the "sticks" (as he terms them), could transfer their importance to their possessor.

And there was another sensation that shot transiently through the susceptible heart of Mr. Oliver Jones. Since his love—alas, the misnomer!—for Ada Parkinson had spluttered and gone out by the sad sea waves at Boulogne, under such very ignominious circumstances, and his escapade at Combe Dean had got him into such trouble at Claude's hands, his heart had been a vacuum. He had, as he phrased it, made a solitude and called it peace.

"There will be a row at Portland Place, perhaps a split. Vallance will try to make out that the Combe Dean marriage was valid. I really shouldn't wonder if in point of actual law it was. That would let him in for bigamy though, if he made it public. That won't suit any of their books. But Mrs. V. will be nowhere.

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Once let the story of the intercepted letters come out, and there will be an explosion. Why should I leave that splendid creature for such a bull of Bashan as Atkins? If I made it square with Vallance and Ada, and held the agreement in terrorem over Mrs. V., who knows what may not be on the cards?" said this dreadful little Lothario.

All this ephemeral feeling vanished, however, when he came face to face with Mrs. Claude. Cold disdain was written so clearly in her handsome face, which also bore the marks of intense anxiety at the gradual realization of her position, that every ardent hope dried out of the diminutive creature, and he was fain to resolve within himself, "Let Atkins try it on, if he dares. I daren't."

"I have come to town at your bidding, Mrs. Vallance;" he said, in a tone of abject servility, "and here is the agreement, which I think you will allow I have kept in every particular."

"We have nothing wherewith to reproach

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each other. I have been as faithful to its provisions as you."

"Yes; only you succeeded, and I failed."

"Succeeded; yes for a time: but only to fail more ruinously now. You know they have met—my husband and Ada Parkinson have met."

"They met the night your husband's comedy was acted at the Clapham Theatre, and they've met almost daily since."

"What? You knew this, and did not tell me!"

"To what purpose? I did all I could to frustrate them. I've followed them like a detective; but what was the use of bothering you until I'd got something tangible?"

"Bothering me! You have let me be fooled by this white-faced girl rather than be 'bothered' as you term it; and then forsooth you parade your fidelity to our bond!"

"One moment, Mrs. Vallance; who was it that was losing—apparently losing,—by this waiting game, more than myself?"

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We were, if you will pardon my saying it, both in the same boat. If your husband was playing you false, what was Ada doing to me? I was only giving them rope enough."

"Letting the girl compromise herself," was the comment Mrs. Vallance chose to put upon his words, and the little hypocrite accepted it.

"Letting her compromise herself past redemption," he replied.

"And now is your Fabian policy, your waiting game, at an end?"

"It is a maxim among us lawyers never to let a lady interfere."

"Interfere!"

"Well, let us draw it mild and say interpose, in any of our plans until absolutely necessary. You will excuse my saying so, but ladies are so apt to import feeling into what ought to be a cold-blooded matter of business," and he tapped the agreement playfully as Shylock does when he asks "Is it not so nominated in the bond?"

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"True. You are right, perhaps; though it appears to me it is impossible to keep feeling out of this matter."

"Now it is; and now, if you like, and if you ask me to do it, I will put two trump cards in your hand."

"You ought never to have held back any trumps you had from me. However, give them to me now. Better late than never," she added, with a sickly smile on her splendid features. She stood as though she knew her death-doom was to come.

"The Rev. Claude Vallance and Miss Ada Parkinson may be seen any day in Brompton Cemetery."

"Brompton Cemetery! By his child's grave! Has he fallen so deeply as that?"

"So deeply. Or else, if it happens to rain, or there is a service on at the Oratory of the Holy Spirit, at number Twenty-Nine Chippenham Street, W.C."

"Is that your first trump-card?"

"That is trump-card number one."

"And the second?"

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"The Reverend Claude Vallance and Ada Parkinson were privately married in Combe Dean Church some considerable time before you and that same gentleman were publicly united at St. George's Church, Hanover Square, by the Bishop of Babylon."

It was in Clara's magnificent boudoir at Portland Place that this revelation was made. She had furnished that boudoir in her own special fashion, and regardless of all other precedents. The hangings were of light amber; the woodwork of deepest black, to imitate ebony. All around were the evidences of luxury. They had been sitting in antique chairs of fabulous value, and she had risen at her last demand—What was the second trump-card? When the thin white bloodless lips of her informant detailed the nature of this last winning card she sunk down for a moment as if overpowered by the stroke, but she recovered herself rapidly, and said, with consummate tact—

"Then the Rev. Claude Vallance is a bigamist?"

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"Morally yes, beyond a doubt. Legally there is considerable doubt. I was the only one who, of course without the knowledge of the contracting parties, witnessed that interesting ceremony."

"And what, in the name of wonder, made you conceal it from me?"

"'Twas not so nominated in the bond. We lawyers, Mrs. Vallance, have a business-like way of adhering strictly to the letter of the law—the letter of our agreements," he added, again tapping jauntily the document he held in his hand. "Had feeling swayed me I should at once have rescued my beloved from the clutches of the seducer——"

"The what?"

"I mean the betrayer of her ignorance and maiden innocence—the man who beguiled her into a ceremony which could do him no good, and might do her an infinity of harm. Please credit me, lawyer though I am, with some feeling in this matter."

"Don't assume the crocodile with me. Wait for a more appreciative audience. So,

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then, I have been fooled on all sides by this husband of mine?"

"Well," said Jones, hesitatingly and almost in deprecation.

"Well! What do you mean?"

"Only that it was rather a case of diamond cut diamond, wasn't it? We began with the letters. If we *are* to use strong words, you know, Mrs. Claude, we may say that, while there is some doubt about your husband's bigamy, there is none about our felony. A post letter is such a dangerous thing to tamper with."

"But he has no proofs."

"Legally again perhaps not, but morally——"

"Oh, drop morals."

"There, of course, your husband, as a clergyman, would say the mischief began. I like him no better than you do, but really, in justice, I must say we began it."

"Like him no better than I! How dare you say such a thing? I vow at this moment I love him better than ever, and would risk

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twice as much to secure him. It is hard that I should fail when I shrank from no means to insure success."

She rested her head on her hand, and looked so utterly woebegone that Jones could not help pitying her, little as he was given to the melting mood.

A rap at the door of the boudoir startled Mr. Jones out of his serenity, for he was strangely nervous in any crisis where he pitted himself against Claude Vallance. Either Clara did not hear it, or thought it was her maid. It was repeated. Claude's voice said: "May I come in, Clara?" and he followed up the demand by entering.

"I heard Mr. Jones was here, so concluded I should not disturb your privacy. Your presence in London is unexpected, Mr. Jones."

"Yes, I—I——"

"Don't trouble to invent an excuse; I infer it. Mrs. Vallance summoned you on business not connected either with the newspaper or the brewery. I guess its nature,

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and am glad you are here, because I think it more than possible you may be concerned in a request I am going to make of Mrs. Vallance. In any case, it would be well I should make it in your presence. I want, Clara," he continued, taking the list of dates which Ada had given him from his pocket, "certain letters which were addressed to me by Ada Parkinson on those dates, when I was staying at Pomona House, and when you used to act amateur postman for me."

"I really do not find any excuse for my being present at this colloquy, Mr. Vallance!" said Jones. "I presume you do not suspect me of conniving at the appropriation of letters addressed to you through the post. It's very serious, you know, Mr. Vallance."

"It's felony," said Clara, "as you reminded me two minutes ago. Deny your complicity and I will show Mr. Vallance the counterpart of the agreement you have in your pocket. Claude, I confess all!" she

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proceeded, with an imploring look at her husband. "I did take the letters, with his aid, and deeply and bitterly have I repented it since. Spare me the humiliation of saying more in his presence. Send him away before you reproach me, and then say your worst. I deserve it, God knows."

"Leave us, sir. I make no doubt you have mentioned to Mrs. Vallance a ceremony you witnessed at Combe Dean church."

"I have told Mrs. Vallance all, sir!" he said quietly, and vanished, glad to escape the explosion.

"It is just as well you should have been apprised of that event, Clara, because that will convince you how deep and sincere was my love for Ada Parkinson."

"You could not love her, Claude."

"You know we think differently, or have got to think differently of late about these religious ceremonies," he continued, with a gesture which begged her not to interrupt him; "yet knowing that, you could bring a life-long misery on her and me."

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"I did not know it at the time; for some reason or other, that odious creature concealed it until to-day from me. But that matters not. I should have acted just the same. I knew then, Claude Vallance, and I know now, that Ada Parkinson could not and cannot satisfy your love. She is too girlish, too insignificant. Instead of lifelong misery being inflicted on you by the destruction of those letters, I considered I was saving you both from such a life. That was not my motive, as you well know. My motive was that which no woman need be ashamed to own to her husband, I loved you; and frankly tell you at this moment that I would do the same thing again to win you from a rival—especially one I felt to be unworthy of you."

Under the circumstances, the best thing would have been for Claude Vallance to have felt immensely flattered by his wife's anxiety to secure him; and on those grounds to have kissed and made friends. Had policy alone swayed his movements, that

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would, no doubt, have been his course. But he was more deeply in love with Ada than ever. Passion had lasted its brief day with Clara; and now that he discovered her duplicity, she began to be loathsome to him. He studiously kept this purloining of the letters before his mind, as if to justify the attitude he had since assumed to Ada. How readily we flatter ourselves that two wrongs make a right. In his pique at Ada's apparent unfaithfulness, he had taken the fatal step of marrying his present wife; and now that he discovered Ada had not been unfaithful, he fretted at the results of his own impetuosity. That was plain English; but when did a man in love ever listen to the simple accents of reason? He still harped on the destruction of Ada's letters.

"Do you mean to tell me those letters are no longer in existence?"

"I burnt every one as it came, by his advice——"

"Jones's?"

"Yes."

"I have no idea what my course will be under these circumstances, Clara," Claude said, as he rose from the chair into which he had thrown himself, and passed his hand wearily across his forehead, "but I wish to avoid all angry recriminations and——"

"Don't know what will be your course! Claude, what do you mean? Surely you will let bygones be bygones. Surely you don't mean to act on this. This can scarcely shake your confidence in me. I committed felony to gain you. Most men would be flattered to find a woman care enough for them to do this; and you talk about not knowing what your course will be. Do you mean to tell me you still cherish affection for this girl?"

"That is a question I refuse to answer."

"Do you? Then I shall begin to recollect that I have rights, and may have to consider my course as well as you."

The explosion was imminent. Vesuvius was in labour and might at any moment send forth its lava-birth. Clara delayed the

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event by crossing over and throwing herself on Claude's knee.

"Claude," she said, in her most seductive voice and beneath her breath, as she had often spoken to him in the days when their passion first inclined them to each other, "I don't want to be romantic, but you know I love you with my whole heart and soul. You know that you are all the world to me. I am no weak girl, but I am powerless as a child when my love for you is concerned. Don't destroy my happiness—our happiness, dear Claude—for our married life has been happy and prosperous so far. Don't destroy it all because I made one false step. I will even, if you wish it, write to Ada Parkinson, or see her and confess my error—my sin, if you like me to speak of it in conventional language, which though meaningless to us, may seem the only word to characterize it in the vocabulary of ordinary mortals. I will do anything, submit to anything, if you will only forgive me and love me as of old."

It pained him to see her thus, and mostly

because he could not make her the promise she asked so vehemently. He might forgive her, but he could not love her. He had only loved once in his life, and the master-passion was now at its height.

What his answer might have been will never be known. The voice of Mr. Villars was heard on the stairs; and he burst into the room, exclaiming, "Where the plague are all you people? Here's Jones in town—everybody exactly where they ought not to be; the Sturminster wire has broken down, and the *Gazette* is minus its London news. Claude, Clara, what is the row? There has been a row. I declare I never interrupted a matrimonial quarrel between you two before, and that's saying a good deal considering you are such old stagers. I know it all," he ran on, taking off his wraps and great coat as he proceeded. "You, Clara, have heard Tabitha Tart's report, which she is spreading all over Sturminster, that Claude is gallivanting with his old love. I came up specially the other day to tell you of it,

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and you both seemed so happy that I didn't say a word except to the harridan herself, whose tongue, as I told her, ought to be slit."

He was assured by Clara that it was "nothing," and Claude at once convinced him that such was the case, by bolting off to see what could be done in the matter of the Sturminster wire.

How strangely and incongruously come these irruptions of the outer world, at a time when our best or worst passions are at work, and all our interest expends itself on the microcosm of self. Claude did his work as mechanically as the very telegraph-wire itself on which he appeared to concentrate his energies. What he was feeling was this, that he had never loved Ada as he did at that moment. He used to feel this every day now, and tried to convey the assurance to her, that his love twenty-four hours since had been as nothing compared to what it was at present. Wherever there is life there must be growth, he argued, and when he

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thought of that dear white face and that thin hand, he was conscious that gradually all life's varied ends and aims were resolving themselves into one, and that was love for Ada. Under these circumstances what hope was there for a satisfactory solution of his matrimonial difficulty?"

When Mr. Oliver Jones got back to Sturminster, which he did at the very earliest opportunity, his movements were characterized by an amount of activity which was altogether unusual, though he was not accustomed by any means to be slothful, or, as his admirers said, to spare himself in the service of the firm. From morn to eve he was in the saddle, and, mounted on his colossal steed, threaded the streets and lanes of Sturminster and its vicinity, getting in the half-yearly bills. He sat up until the most dissipated hours at night in the counting-house at the brewery, poring over ledgers and other portentous volumes, while he kept the cashier and clerks at the newspaper office in a state of continual suspense by dropping down upon

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them incontinently for accounts. What could have made Mr. Jones so immensely active, they asked, since that last visit of his to London?

Mr. Villars was one of those men whose whole soul had become commercial. He thoroughly enjoyed business himself, and liked to see any one go in for it *con amore*. He therefore turned quite a deaf ear when complaints reached him as to Oliver Jones's activity. Wilson, of the *Gazette*, was furious, and would resign if that pestilent fellow kept poking his nose into editorial affairs. Miles wrote from the borough to repudiate "that little sneak's" interference. Even Cyprian Gules drove his basket-chair over from Combe Dean to tell Mr. Villars Oliver Jones was offending everybody by the way he was importuning them for some twopenny half-penny account.

"I can't help it, my boy, you must all of you wag your tongues just as you like against my right-hand man. You should only see the beautiful balance-sheet he pro-

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duces for me every half-year. I can see to a brass farthing how I stand both with regard to the brewery, newspaper, and private account. It's about the half-year now, and the balance-sheet is in course of production. If its elaboration discomposes my customers or the rest of my staff, I'm very sorry for it, but I really can't help it. Why, talk of a certain person and he is sure to appear! Here *is* Jones," he said, as the bell rang. "I saw him pass the window. Come in, Jones," he added, when the servant announced him. "We are all friends here. Why, man, what is the matter? You have been working too hard. You must take a holiday. Is that the balance sheet?"

"These are the balance-sheets, sir," he replied, handing a roll of papers.

"Yes, of course, I ought to have spoken in the plural. There's a picture, Gules!" he added, as he unrolled a cabalistic scroll before the curate's unintelligent gaze. "Ah, he doesn't appreciate it, Jones. A twopenny washing book is his ideal of ac-

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counts. And now, Jones, are you going to take a holiday, or must I force you?"

"I came to ask for a month's leave of absence, Mr. Villars."

"That's right. Take two, three, if you like."

"No; one will suffice. You will find everything in order," said the little clerk, handing his keys to his principal.

"It's as well to have the keys here in case of emergencies; but if you have any love letters among the ledgers you may rest assured I shan't read them. I shall probably never look at the books, and ——"

"There will be a chaos for me to reduce to order when I come back."

"In all probability. Where are you going?"

"On a Cook's Excursion to Switzerland, and Mr. Atkins is going to keep my house warm until I come back. He wants a basis of operations for his amorous campaign against the half-dozen Misses Evans."

After the usual farewells, and a caution

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not to tumble down crevasses, Mr. Jones left, and next morning departed by the first train for London. He bore with him only one small portmanteau, on which he lavished all his care and attention. When he reached the metropolis he struck right across in a hansom, avoiding Portland Place, though he had stated to Mr. Villars his intention of calling, and ended his somewhat mysterious journey so far by taking a ticket to Liverpool. Had those enterprizing gentlemen, Messrs. Cook, struck out a new route to Switzerland by way of the Mersey?



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CHAPTER X.

THE MUSIC MUTE.

WHEN Claude left his wife's boudoir he felt like a schoolboy who is just emancipated from study, and able to go whithersoever his desires prompt him. In this case it need scarcely be said the special direction which those desires assumed was Erompton. He was glad to be able to walk boldly to the house and ask for Miss Parkinson, instead of waiting for Ada at the cemetery or the oratory. The old Captain was not likely to raise any objection, and on this occasion he was not at home. He was fond of sunning himself on fine days, and had taken the opportunity of a more than usually balmy afternoon to sally forth *solus* for a walk.

The lodging-house servant settled it that Miss Parkinson had a follower, and her mistress felt passing qualms as to whether the visit of a gentleman in papa's absence was quite consistent with the respectability of her stuccoed establishment. Claude, however, had so little of the Adonis about him that he threw these functionaries off their guard, and induced them to devote their attention to the one o'clock dinner of the drawing-room, instead of airing their ears and eyes at the keyhole. Had they done so they might have been considerably edified.

After saluting Ada in true lover-like fashion Claude threw himself on the rickety sofa, and stated his intention of going in for a good long talk.

"What a time it is since we have been together under purely domestic circumstances like this, is it not?" he said; "now I can picture what it would have been like had we realized the Combe Dean curate's ideal. Let me look at that dear face," he added, draw-

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ing her close to him. "I think the chief beauty in your face, Ada, is in the forehead ; or perhaps it is only because I do not see it so frequently as I do the other portions. Let me push back the hair from your brow, and play with that dear frizzle while I tell you of the explosion."

"The explosion ! Then it has come ?"

"Partially. There is more to follow, as the goody hymn says." And he told her all that had taken place that same day between himself, his wife, and Oliver Jones.

"And now what do you intend to do ?" she asked, as he concluded his narrative. "It is, of course, impossible for me to say that I feel as I suppose I ought to for your wife, though I can quite understand the horror of her position ; but she has brought it upon herself, or at all events it was none of my seeking, was it ?"

"Certainly not ; but it was of mine in a measure. I must not forget that, though it will not affect my dealings with you. Whatever happens you must not suffer ; but I

cannot deny that my marriage was a voluntary act on my part. I ought to have remained true to our motto—ought to have been faithful to death.”

“Of course you ought, you dear impetuous old fellow. Instead of that you jumped to the conclusion that I was everything that was horrible. Tell me the truth now. Did you not anathematize me as the days went by and no letter came—or, at least, seemed to come?”

“Frailty, thy name is Ada! No, I did not anathematize you. I felt you were either really dead, or dead to me; and we always think kindly of the dead.”

“And by that little bit of special pleading you thought to salve conscience, did you?”

“I did not feel the necessity of that, because, you see, I had got to regard myself as the aggrieved party, and there is so much gained if you can once get to look on yourself as an injured individual—a gentleman with a grievance.”

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"And all the time I was grizzling my life away on those horrid Boulogne sands, thinking——"

"Ah, that is more to the point. What did you think of, me?"

"Shall I tell you honestly?"

"If you are inclined to be *dis*-honest, don't tell me at all, please. But no, that is the blessing, or one of the chief blessings, of my association with you—I never fear your deceiving me. My previous experience with women had rather inclined me to apply to them the Psalmist's remark, made in reference to the other sex, 'All men are liars.' But what did you think?"

"I could sum it up in less than two lines of 'Don Juan':—

. Man to man so oft unjust,
Is always so to woman.

I thought it was the old story, that you had found time hang on your hands at Combe Dean, and so 'made up' to the only eligible young lady in the place."

"That might account for the earlier por-

tion of our poor love affair, but scarcely for the sequel, eh?"

"Well, then, I thought you found me rather nice, perhaps; found there was more depth of feeling in me than in the average of country young ladies——"

"Oh, you gave me credit for discovering so much? But then the marriage——"

"Ah, that staggered me. If you led me to that without meaning anything you must have been quite a different being from what I imagined you at first. At first, Claude, I thought you a demigod, and felt that your mere presence at Combe Dean was quite enough for me. Then, you know, you came down from your pedestal when you made love to me. That was quite a different feeling, then. Do you comprehend?"

"Perfectly, and am quite willing for the demigod phase to be at an end. Then, when I seemed to have forgotten you, after going through that solemn ratification, I must have shot off to the very antipodes of my demigod position, and become a demon."

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"In the proper, as opposed to the vulgar idea of a devil, yes."

"What, then, is your idea of diabolical nature?"

"Pure intellect without goodness. Is not that something of your own conception? I think I have borrowed it from you, as indeed I have most of my present ideas."

"Were I an artist," rejoined Claude, "and commissioned by some eccentric millionaire to paint a portrait of his Satanic Majesty, I should simply represent a polished gentleman, possessed of every physical and intellectual advantage, but destitute of the moral element. As my conception of the utmost depravity to which such an one could lend himself I would picture him, for his own ends, playing one like you false, or corrupting an innocent child with his devil's doubt."

"It was precisely so I sometimes pictured you, because really, Claude, there was no reason why you should have said you loved me. We were and could have remained

excellent friends without that. When I took into consideration the solemn ceremony to which I lent myself, only at your request, it did seem to me that you were the incarnation of pure malevolence."

"You could not have embodied my idea of the fiend more accurately."

"But that passed. It was only on dull, depressing days that I felt this, when the great leaden clouds lay like piles of mountain scenery along the sea-line."

"Ah! how those days kill such as have the misfortune to be sensitive."

"Or when papa was ill and querulous, and all our poor affairs seemed going to rack and ruin, then I used to chant my *De Profundis*; but anon the sun would break out, and I would cry and shed happy tears to think I had been unjust to you. I felt our sun would come out too one day from behind the dark clouds. I looked at the ring, and felt that while there was life there was hope."

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"And you see your woman's intuition was a true one."

"Well, I scarcely know whether we ought to say so. Is it not rather a short-sighted view of things to think so? The clouds seem coming down very perceptibly."

"They are, but with this difference—the sun of our love shines steadily through them. Have you never seen this at sundown of a gloomy day, those dreadful clouds lying, as you said, like lead along the horizon, and veiling the whole face of the sky, all except where one potent ray cleft them like a sword-blade? Is not that Nature's embodiment of our present position?"

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"The worst of all, Claude, and what I could not—nay, you must let me say I *cannot* understand—was your marriage. Looking back again to our first meeting and my subsequent demigod impression of you, I could quite imagine you falling in love with your present wife. I used to stand in awe

of Clara Thornton, and should have expected a great big clever fellow like you to be struck with her far sooner than with poor insignificant me. But it seemed so impossible you could love both of us—I don't mean at the same time; but it seemed that if you cared about me you would scarcely fancy her, or vice versa."

"And you were right; but then, you know, you were dead."

"But I even remember somebody saying that the motto *Ad mortem fidelis* was not strong enough for him. He would have altered it to *Post mortem fidelis*."

"I can only think of my conduct as what is so graphically termed in the Bible the 'Mystery of Iniquity.'"

Ada still rambled on, though they had discussed this subject over and over again; but there was less restraint now than under the circumstances that had attended their conversations hitherto.

"How I used to follow your turns of thought in your published pieces, and what

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ideas it used to give me of poetical justice! Do you remember a little thing you wrote in a magazine and called it 'Writ in Sand?'"

"My dear Ada, if I had read it a week after it was bought and paid for, I should have criticised it quite dispassionately as somebody else's. I might have quaffed the river of Lethe in respect of my own compositions; I never remember them."

"I learnt this one by heart out on the Boulogne beach; shall I quote it to you?"

"If it's very short indeed, I may endure it; but it's not an operation I generally like, hearing my own *vers de société* quoted. Go ahead."

"This is how you delivered yourself:—

Written on fallible sand,
With the conscious sky above,
Along the solemn strand
That skirts my ocean of love.

Love-vows written in sand—
Though she swore 'twas granite rock
That for ever should withstand
Time's mutations and shock.

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Came but a gentle breeze
 Sweeping across that vow,
 Scarcely stirring the trees—
 Where is the love-tale now?

Came the ebb and flow
 Of a transient sorrow's tide;
 Who shall ever know
 Such a love-vow lived and died?

None! Alas, she knows
 I love her far too well
 Ever the truth to disclose,
 Or my bitter wrong to tell.

Though she broke my heart
 With that beautiful cruel hand,
 Wielding the poisoned dart
 Of a love-vow writ in sand.

That was cool, sir, if it referred to me.
 Did you mean it to do so, may I ask?"

"To a being as ideal as Lord Byron's
 Thyrza, I believe; but I have no more
 recollection of having written it than as
 though no such thing had ever 'slipt idly
 from me.'"

"But you do not repudiate it?"

"Unfortunately you saw it with my name
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"And now, as to our course, Claude—in reference to your domestic difficulties. Is not this just like us? we go on chattering about indifferent things——"

"Meaning our noble selves——"

"Until the very fag-end of our conversation. Papa may be here any moment, and then our lips will be sealed. What *do* you mean to do about this dreadful crisis?"

"Sleep upon it. We won't discuss it any more to-day. Put it from us, and remember only that we are together. Things are never so bad but they may be worse. I shall not only sleep upon it, or think about it, I shall pray for right guidance," he continued. "Do you the same, Ada, at our service to-night. Often and often I have felt my views get clear during that service on subjects about which they had been dark before. I only want to 'do justly' in this matter. I would rather 'love mercy' than not, and so I am sure would you."

"I would indeed. But I confess justice

and mercy in this case seem more than usually incompatible."

"Wait. Perhaps all may be clear by to-morrow this time."

Shortly afterwards Captain Parkinson came in from his walk; and again Claude was shocked to see how he hobbled along like an old man. He did not seem in the least surprised to find him there, so Claude said—

"You see, Captain, I have not been long in availing myself of your invitation."

When the old man went to his room to hang up his poor threadbare walking-coat, Claude said—

"Ada, in a remark I made to you a short time since, I said I felt I had endowed you with all my worldly goods—just as much as though you had a family. I forgot you have a family."

"Claude!"

"That dear father of yours is growing old before his time, because he does not live as he has been accustomed to. If a cask of

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Stomachic Ale, or a dozen of curious dry sherry comes astray here, or if a tailor makes a mistake and sends home a walking-coat that has not been ordered, have the goodness to make no remarks, but put them in readiness for your father. I don't believe he will remark their presence ; but they will do him good. He is your little 'family;' and as paterfamilias, or at least as your wedded lord, I have a right to the luxury."

"You are a dear, thoughtful fellow. He will never notice them ; he is, as you see, suffering from lack not of necessaries, but of those little luxuries which become necessities in course of time."

When Captain Parkinson reappeared, Claude said—

"I remember your penchant for a good Manilla cheroot, and have brought a few bundles for your acceptance. Will you light one with me? I know Ada does not object, and I hope, for her own sake, your landlady does not, because I think you will like to light one."

He lighted it mechanically, and never noticed that Claude called Ada by her Christian name. By a curious coincidence, too, the cask of Stomachic Ale did come from the Borough, and a case of sherry from a wine merchant in the course of the evening; and the old man partook of each without asking any questions. He waxed quite hilarious over his favourite cheroots and sherry, but the discipline of life had clearly told upon him, and he was prematurely in his second childhood. It is painful to see the bodily frame give way before its time, but inexpressibly more so is it if the mental machinery gets out of gear at a period when it ought to be in its prime. One of the earliest indications is, that people begin to act and talk as though the individual in question were not by; as though he had already ceased to count as an unit in the human family.

"Claude," said Ada, tacitly following his example in her mode of addressing him, "do you know I think papa would like to attend your service?"

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"I did not even know Mr. Vallance had continued to officiate."

"Nor has he in a regular way ; but he has organized an irregular service which I think you would like."

"Your papa will feel flattered by the imputation of liking my irregularities ; but I need not say, Captain Parkinson, I shall be glad to see you. Come to-night. I think that was one great reason why Ada did not mention our having met. She has helped me a little in the musical portion of my service, and feared to compromise me by alluding to it."

"Discreet girl. Let us go by all means. Do you like this sherry ? Pray help yourself to another glass."

The three went together to the service, and Captain Parkinson was much pleased and comforted with it.

"I think the idea excellent," he said. "Apart from all extremes, the spirit of worship seems in that simple, but solemn service brought to a focus. Why do we always

fancy we shall be heard for our much speaking? I think I never realized so intensely the chastened tone of the Church of England in reference to sacramental grace as through your beautiful embodiment of it in your quiet service. Good-night."

"We will decide on the future to-morrow—here," said Claude. "Good-night." And he hied him as was his wont to Fleet Street.

"Well, dear Ada, and has sleep brought its clearing-up of our difficulty to you?" Claude asked when, before their gathering they met in the little upper chamber. "I confess it has failed me. I got home very late from the office, and slept, as I always do when that is the case, in my dressing-room."

"Have you and Mrs. Vallance not met?"

"No; what does the oracle say?"

"You will trust the woman's intuition, Claude?"

"Yes. That is, of course, if it quite squares with my own inclinations."

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"How a man always hedges thus! Well, then, all we can do is to remain as we are. All I can do, I mean, is to be to you what I am now. Your own course at home I feel is not for me to prescribe or even suggest."

"Sensible, but scarcely satisfactory. However, I must think it out farther. I find this is one of the occasions when a man is thrown back so helplessly on self as to need a more than ordinary assistance."

The service was somewhat more thinly attended than usual; and, just before its close, the little door swung noisily on its hinges. Some one entered and took a seat quite at the back. Claude and Ada looked up simultaneously at the new-comer. It was Mrs. Claude Vallance!

In the ordinary course of things, Claude would have probably given an address, but omitted it under existing circumstances. Clara remained sitting, pale as a marble statue, until all had left. Claude, having taken off his surplice and cassock, advanced with Ada to meet his wife, and ceremoni-

ously held the door open, motioning them to go upstairs. When they reached the little room above, Clara first broke the painful silence.

"Not finding you in your usual rendezvous by your dead child's grave, Claude, I sought you here."

"By whom directed or for what purpose I can scarcely guess, unless indeed you are going to make this lady the only reparation in your power, by giving up her letters which you intercepted."

"Of what use would they be to her now, even if they were in existence, which I told you they were not? She seems to have traded upon that mock-marriage so thoroughly, that she has taken entire possession of you. What can she want of her school-girl letters? There was nothing so very original in them. The best thing to have done with a man of sense would have been to let him receive them. If they did not disenchant him he must be demented."

"Criticism, Mrs. Vallance," said Ada,

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very calmly, "is utterly thrown away in this case. They came from the heart. They were the letters of a young girl to the man whose plighted wife she was. You stole them, and with them the hand of him who was my husband in the sight of God, long before he was yours only in the sight of man; but you did not steal his heart."

"In matrimonial contracts you will find the sight of man a good deal more important than the sight of God, and the hand than the heart."

"I know you have abjured your faith in God, and it would seem in man too, Mrs. Vallance. We have not."

"Better abjure it than prostitute it with such a mockery as this service of yours, or blaspheme it by bracketing your name with my husband's."

"Unless you can discuss this matter calmly, Clara, Miss Parkinson will retire. I presume from your coming here that you have some plan to propose. Now you mention the mock marriage as you term it, I

know, of course, who your informant is. Perhaps he has posted you up in the legal aspect of this case."

"Perhaps he has, perhaps he has not," answered Mrs. Vallance, a red flush of anger now taking the place of her ashen paleness. From what source my demand comes I decline to say, but I make it peremptorily. Dissolve at once this hideous connexion of yours. Give me a written engagement that you will see this girl no more, or else——"

"Wait. I do not ask the alternative. I decline it whatever be the result. We have discussed this matter already, both yesterday and to-day, and I feel that Miss Parkinson's view is the right one. I might have been inclined to take even a more serious view of the binding nature of the mock marriage you speak of."

"No doubt, as a man, you would. What, may I ask, is Miss Parkinson's view?"

"That we remain exactly as we are."

"In other words she openly proclaims herself your mistress, and casts aside the

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paltry figment of wifehood. So far she is more consistent than you. She is openly and glaringly indecent. You are a pitiful hypocrite——”

At a signal from Claude Ada quietly withdrew, and he stood between his wife and the door, prepared to put his broad shoulder against the latter should Clara evince any disposition to follow Ada downstairs.

As soon as the street-door closed Clara's manner changed entirely. She burst into a passionate fit of weeping, and cast herself on the ground at Claude's feet. They might have been standing to be modelled for a statuette of Arthur and Guinevere.

“Claude—husband!” she cried, in a voice broken with emotion, “What is this terrible change in lives until now so happy? What has estranged you from me? Is it possible that all these months have been but a hideous mockery?”

“How dare you ask the question?” he said, in a cold, hard voice that seemed to smite her to the heart. “How dare you

appeal to pity when you have shown none, when you have schemed and contrived in the most unwomanly way, and stooped to use the aid of one beneath the dignity of man, in order to accomplish what? To steal from me, as she told you but now, the love of the only woman—yes, Clara, I will speak plainly—the only woman I ever really loved? You cringe and fawn to me in the same breath as you asperse the character of the truest woman and most delicate lady that ever trod God's earth."

At these cruel words—yet words whose truth she could not gainsay—her woman's pride re-asserted itself. She rose from her lowly position, and confronted him face to face. She was nearly as tall as her husband, and looked superlatively handsome as she stood, and defied the only man she had ever loved.

"So it has come to this, Claude Vallance, has it? It is to be war between us?"

"War to the knife."

"Be it so; but bear me witness the war

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is not of my seeking. I have done all I could for peace——”

“By making a solitude and calling it so? —yes. You shall not go on without contradiction asserting that everybody is at fault but yourself, or you will end in believing it. I say that from you and your meanness alone sprang all this dispute.”

“I have never asserted that I was faultless in this matter; I confess I was grievously in fault. But my fault sprang from blind love to you, and though you spurn me, I tell you I would do it over again to-morrow, were it to be done. You at least met my love half-way. I only removed from your path one who is utterly unworthy of you, whom you did not and do not love, though perhaps you cajole yourself into thinking you do. It was optional with you to propose to me or not. The world was all before you where to choose. She and I were not the only two women in it. You cannot—you dare not accuse me of having made unwomanly advances

to you as she has done in my very sight——”

“You shall not speak to me thus. You may say what you like of me, but you shall not defame her.”

“Shall not, forsooth! Who is to prevent me?”

“I will prevent you by leaving this place myself if you refuse to go, as I bid you go.”

“I will leave it, and you shall leave it too. You shall not carry on this burlesque of worship here, unless John Babylon is more of a dummy bishop than even you have taught me to believe him. I will write to him this night and tell him that you are profaning the Sacrament by having impure women to sing at its celebration——”

Claude said not another word, but took his hat, passed by his wife without noticing her, and so into the street.

Clara wept no more. She did not wring her hands or faint, as most ladies would have

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felt bound to do under the circumstances. Flower Fielding looked in several times for the purpose of putting out the gas; but Clara still retained the same rigid position, as though she were a dead woman propped up in Claude's ecclesiastical chair. She was not sitting listlessly, however. She was working out the problem of the future in her own peculiar fashion. The solution seemed almost satisfactory, for when Flower looked in for the last time she said, with a smile—

“At length, girl, I am going. I have taxed your patience, have I not?”

“O no, ma'am! I only came in to see whether you wanted anything.”

Flower was really afraid, as she afterwards confessed, lest the beautiful lady might have done something desperate. She had heard high words, and wondered how Mr. Vallance could possibly be cross with his handsome wife; he was always so gentle to her. It is not only that we fall short of heroism with those who know us best, or fail to be pro-

phets in our own country and among our own kindred, but we are often held to be bears in our own domestic circle, while those outside think of us as sucking doves. Whose will be the verdict ratified at the end of time? or will infinite justice avail to strike the balance?

Claude looked in at the Aborigines' Club as he went citywards, and ordered a bed for that night.

"Hallo, old fellow, what's the meaning of this?" asked a member, whose whole existence was passed at the club. "It's very well for a lone lorn critter like me to pitch his humble wigwam here; but what can tempt a swell with the best house and finest wife in London to adopt such a primeval custom I can't imagine. You're not going in for a course of mild dissipation, are you?"

"Something like it, really. One's ideas get into a Portland Place rut, and want refurbishing."

"O, of course, if it's the real noble savage,

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the primitive type of man before he was dwarfed by civilization, you want to study, here's the place."

"Well, join me here at supper at the witching hour. I shall bring up two or three of the leader-staff, and a few other genial souls."

"You are sure to find me here. I have so devoted myself to the study of Aboriginal humanity, that I feel comfortable nowhere else—except, by the way, in that Portland Place rut you were talking of. There is a good deal of the primeval nobility combined with certain advantages of modern civilization in those gatherings. What, you're off? Shall I retain any eligible fellows who may look in during the evening for your supper to-night?"

"Do, there's a good fellow."

The mirth that night was fast and furious, and the symposium was prolonged very deep into the small hours indeed. That was a peculiarity of Aboriginal banquets; but another was the fact that it was a feast

of reason and a flow of soul. The men did not confound enjoyment with inebriety. The supper was not by any means a recherché one. It required that best sauce, appetite, for its appreciation; but most of the guests were men who came fresh from hard brainwork, and required to be reinvigorated. Looking back over recent events, Claude could scarcely help asking himself why he had not been satisfied with this—why he must needs complicate his social relations, first by ordination, and then by matrimony.

"I fear I am fatally inclined to have too many irons in the fire!" he remarked *sotto voce* to his next neighbour, in one of those moments of confidence which are apt to supervene when men have been piping the long night together, and there is a disposition to adjourn bedwards amongst all but the most inveterate sitters-up. "The jelly-fish is the type of existence that I feel one ought to copy."

"Yes, you get very near indeed to Aboriginal animated nature there."

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By-and-by there was a chorus of yawns, gradually increasing in frequency and intensity, and the noble Aborigines retired and slept.

During those same small hours, in the big mansion in Portland Place, Clara Vallance sat and waited for Claude. She made the pretence of reading a book—one of his books—a book every page of which she had seen elaborated, and thought she could trace to her own influence. Should she lose such a hold on him for silly jealousy? He could not really love Ada; or, if he did, it was but a symptom of weakness such as is apt to show itself even in the strongest natures, and which was, no doubt, connected with his penchant for priestliness. She would look at it as such. She would forbear asking him to eschew Ada's company; she would even invite her and her father to the house, and apologize freely and fully for her hard words of yesterday. It is the time for penitence, those solemn hours when the world pauses a moment in its giddy race for men to be born and die; and when we can almost be-

lieve the universal tradition that the parted ones passed on before us return with their gentle influences. Clara felt this; and had Claude returned, would have taken him by the hand and told him so, would have confessed her fault, and made all the reparation in her power by welcoming the injured woman, and laying no veto on his friendship with her. What the result might have been it boots not to inquire. He never came. When she opened her shutters the sun streamed in, and her good resolutions disappeared. "So he does not return," she murmured. "He will not have peace. Let it be so. Let it be—war to the knife."

If, as Bishop Butler tells us, intentions are acts, Clara must have been credited with a good act that night, only unfortunately a more popular opinion is that a most ineligible locality is paved with these same good intentions.

Claude Vallance's present occupations were such as to allow of unlimited lying in bed of a morning, and he availed himself of

this privilege to its fullest extent on the morrow of the Aboriginal banquet. He quieted his conscience with what might or might not be a pious fraud, saying to himself that he wrote much better when fresh from a long sleep. Certain it is he always slept with writing materials by his bedside, and did a great deal of his magazine work in a recumbent position. He was writing hard at noontide, intending shortly to get up and pay a visit to Brompton, when a thundering rap at his bedroom door disturbed his equanimity, and called forth a pretty strong objurgation from him. He thought it was some brother Aborigine who ought to have known better. It was George Villars, who stood beside his bed with a countenance of blank dismay. Claude at once guessed that he had come from Clara, and feared she might have done something desperate.

"Mr. Villars," said Claude, "you have, of course, come from Clara——"

"Yes, Claude, I have, and I'm sorry to

hear there is bad blood between you ; especially sorry to see you here, because, as far as I can learn, both have been in the wrong, and nothing has so far occurred which may not be tided over with a little mutual concession. This standing aloof, my dear boy, diminishes your chances, and makes my position very difficult——”

“ I quite see that——”

“ But I’ve got a more selfish motive in hunting you up this morning. Bad as it is, your grievance will keep better than mine. Some people in my position would say they were ruined. I don’t say that, but I’m hit terribly hard——”

“ Hit !”

“ By that little scoundrel Jones. You know he went for his holiday. We find he’s absconded to America, and on looking into his papers it’s clear he has been embezzling wholesale for years.”

“ I’m not the least surprised at it.”

“ Well, perhaps I’ve trusted him foolishly. However, that’s not to the purpose. Jump

up, dress and come with me to Scotland Yard. We want information which only you can give us. A couple of officers are going off in the next ship that sails. It's not impossible we may have to ask you to cross the Atlantic with them for purposes of identification."

"Is it the newspaper, or the brewery that has chiefly suffered?" asked Claude, as he jumped into his integuments.

"My gentleman seems to have distributed his favours with the most delightful impartiality between the two. He converted everything into cash, and carried all his effects in a carpet bag, so as to disarm suspicion, giving it out that he was going on a Cook's Excursion to Switzerland. He even sold his household furniture on the quiet to Atkins, who, of course, had no notion what was brewing, and only did it to accommodate Jones, as he said he was in want of money."

"But this does not create any real difficulty, does it?"

"Well, the fact is I have been sailing pretty near the wind lately. The girls' money was all so much capital taken out of the two concerns. The new establishments in town for the paper and the brewery have been a drag too; but I hope to avoid Basinghall Street, though I may have to ask for consideration to enable me to do so."

The great brawny man sat there, looking as miserable, and being, in fact, as near shedding tears as Mrs. Vallance in her boudoir. Commercial status is as dear to the heart of a man like George Villars as love is bound up with the being of his passionate daughter. We are probably wrong in making the tender passion so exceptional a one as we do. It is only one among many, more generally diffused than the others, perhaps, but owing much of its unique position to the fact that it is shared equally between the sexes, whereas the others are mostly incidental to the masculine gender. George Villars was suffering agonies as acute as Clara Vallance, and both masked their feel-

ings with all the power of their strong natures.

"Now, when you've been to Scotland Yard and looked after your newspaper work, you'll come up to Portland Place to dinner, won't you? Don't, for Heaven's sake, let this breach widen, or it will be worse than all our misfortunes."

"I will come, yes. The mere circumstance of my stopping with the Aborigines is no very exceptional one. I am glad Clara has consulted you in our dilemma. I shall be quite willing to abide by your decision."

"Spoken like a sensible fellow. I knew there was no cause for Clara's anxiety. Women always will go into rhapsodies. Why the deuce folks should fly off at a tangent from each other when a few words would square everything I never could guess. I like to have it out. Now, then, let's go to Scotland Yard. I only hope we shall catch this pitiful little scoundrel."

Claude, alas! did not pass the evening at Portland Place. He sent a letter from his

London newspaper office—not that of the *Clodshire Gazette*—to say that a late sitting of the House would chain him to his desk, as he had to write a political leader. This might have passed muster, but Sir Charles Wentworth, who really did want the political leader, having called at the two newspaper offices and the Aborigines Club, drove on to Portland Place, on the chance of finding him there, and divulged the fact that Claude had not been at either office or club, nor was he expected at the former.

As a matter of fact known to us for whom the roofs are off all houses, and the doors made of glass, Claude passed the evening in the stuccoed lodging-house at Brompton, after service at the oratory. He smoked Manillas and drank dry sherry with the Captain; and when his host waxed unromantically sleepy and indiscreetly adjourned to bed, he remained stretched on the sofa talking unutterable things to Ada, as happy, as utterly oblivious while he puffed the blue smoke playfully amongst her hair, which

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he had pulled down and made stream over her shoulders, as if Clara Vallance had never existed, or Oliver Jones made free with the Sturminster accounts.

“To this conclusion must we come, Ada, and—as I said before, one has a good deal to be thankful for. We must drift like this as long as the present complications surround us. I see no way out of the labyrinth, but you seem to have a clue. These will be our oases in the desert of life. It will be our fault if they at all resemble angels’ visits by coming few and far between. My married life is a lie; but neither you nor I made it so. There is something—nay, very much—in that. Our position has been forced upon us. Who dare blame us if we make it as tolerable as we can? It will be but for a short time at longest, and then depend upon it we shall be together for ever——”

“And in the meantime all is to come right, even here, recollect. Trust your Sibyl.”

The Music Mute.

273

"Dixit David cum Sibylla."

"Please 'm, missis say," observed a small drowsy servant, who entered after a faint knock, "shall she shut up?"

"Tell your mistress by no means to lose her beauty-sleep, but to go to bed at once," said Claude, who took it as a hint that he ought to depart. "I'm off too;" and he drove back—not to Portland Place, but to the Aborigines Club again.



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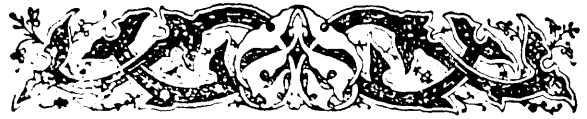
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CHAPTER XI.

FIRESIDE TRAGEDIES.

SURELY Fools' Paradise approached its climax when Claude Vallance, upon a vacancy occurring in the drawing-room floor of the stuccoed lodging-house at Brompton, incontinently took those apartments, and there spent all his time when he was not occupied in the City or engaged with Mr. Villars in ferreting out Oliver Jones's delinquencies. It was not necessary for him to cross the Atlantic with the detectives, at all events for the present; while his father-in-law was so engrossed with business and obliged to be so frequently at Sturminster, that he did not notice, even if he knew, Claude's now complete absence from Portland Place. He went there,

indeed, for the Saturday evening receptions and the Sunday suppers; and no one who was present could detect the slightest evidence of anything wrong, though some of the Aborigines more than suspected it. Claude and Clara were each too proud to let the world see their wounds; but the breach was wider than could be spanned over by words or even acts. Probably had not the pecuniary difficulties of Mr. Villars occurred to complicate matters, the climax would have come sooner than it did.

Every hour he could spare he spent in his Fools' Paradise, talking soft silly nothings with Ada, or listening to the fatuous conversation of her father. All he wanted now was to be with her. Any hopes of things "coming right" in the conventional sense of the term, was farther off than ever. Their position was unique, and they had to invent their own remedy, their own method of righting the wrong, by a sort of moral lynch-law.

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There was something terribly grotesque in the circumstance of Claude going to his great house before the visitors came on a Saturday and Sunday, and leaving when the last had gone, simply for the sake of keeping up appearances. He even went through the formality of bidding Clara good-night before the servants, who were ready enough to believe that his constant absence was due to his newspaper work and Jones's defalcations. If they suspected more than this, it was to no one's interest to say or hint such a thing.

At length one Sunday evening when this had gone on for some time, Claude noticed that on his taking his departure, Clara changed her usual good-night, and said, with the slightest possible emphasis—

“Good-by, Claude!”

He walked all the way from Portland Place to Brompton that night by the light of a broad autumnal moon, and as he paced the flags he found himself timing his footsteps with Longfellow's musical stanza:—

Fireside Tragedies.

277

By the fireside tragedies are acted,
 In whose scenes appear two actors only,
 Wife and husband,
 And above them God, the sole spectator.

It was such a fireside tragedy that Clara Vallance was perpetrating. The servants had all retired, and the same moonbeams which were lighting Claude to Ada, streamed into her boudoir, as she sat over a low fire and cast thereon the last fragments of the contents of her writing-case.

"So," she soliloquized, as she watched them burn to ashes, "I have not now a line of his writing in my possession. I can bear this no longer. If he is cruel as the grave, so will I be, and as mysterious too. I have tracked *his* footsteps, and know whither he goes. Let him do the same by me if he can. But he will not take the trouble—no, he will not take the trouble."

She uttered these words without the slightest emotion, but syllabled them articulately to herself. Her face was pale and determined—so pale that she could not help stopping to look at its reflection as she

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passed the cheval glass, and saw the moonbeams deepen tenfold the pallor which she felt beforehand must be there.

"Yes; cruel as the grave, and as mysterious," she kept repeating to herself, as she slowly and deliberately removed her evening dress and substituted a plain walking costume. Having put on this, and attended to its minutest details, such as the buttoning her gloves, and arranging her bonnet strings, she glanced again round the apartment for any particle of paper that might have escaped her notice. There was no passionate farewell, no romantic missive left behind. She passed down the carpeted stairs neither noisily nor with studied silence, opened the front door, and went out into the moonlight, closing the portal behind her, and still muttering between her teeth, not so articulately as before—

"As cruel as the grave, and as mysterious!"

She had gone, leaving no clue behind her,

and anxious only that none should guess whither. Her pride—perhaps her love—could bear the terrible tension no longer. She only wanted to be alone ; anywhere out of the world.

Such was Fireside Tragedy number one !

The Portland Place establishment was not exactly the pattern of a well-regulated household. It was not unusual for its mistress to be late on the morrow of receptions ; therefore no anxiety was felt at Clara's non-appearance for some time. Even when her maid discovered that she was not in her chamber at all, nor had her bed been slept in, it was still considered within the bounds of probability that she had gone out with Claude. They would wait until dinner-time before they sent down to the office. Emily Denton called during the day, and reassured the servants when they began to grow apprehensive. She was quite certain that Claude and Clara were together, and had no doubt that their absence was to be accounted for by some new discovery in the

matter of Oliver Jones's embezzlement. They were not such a regular family that the ponds in the neighbourhood were dragged if one of the members happened to be half-an-hour late for dinner.

It had been pretty well decided, on a rough survey of the position, that one of the two institutions must go, either the brewery or the newspaper; and it was so far agreed on all hands that the newspaper should be the one retained. Sir Charles Wentworth offered liberal support for this, but was not inclined to bolster up the Stomachic Ale. Besides, George Villars was getting old, and Claude could help him in the journalistic line, but not in the brewery. Even so, however, the borders of the affair would have to be narrowed. The London office had been a mistake. It was a brilliant *coup*, but had scarcely paid its way. What Sir Charles wanted was simply a paper to support his interests in the county; and he put it to Claude with some diffidence whether it would be worth his while to

throw up his London connexion, and go back to Sturminster as editor of the *Dorsetshire Gazette*, pure and simple. Claude said he would think it over—that meant he would ask Ada what answer he should give.

Both she and her father had one wish in common, and that was to go back and live and die at Combe Dean. The world had not used them so kindly as to make them care to mix with it further.

“It sounds selfish, I am afraid, my dear Claude,” said Ada, “because it tends to narrow your sphere; but there is nothing I should like so much as for us all to go back to dear old Combe Dean again. You ask my advice, and I give it plainly, though I frankly confess how much my own wishes have to do with the matter. Go back to Sturminster.”

“I happen to know too,” added the Captain, “that Dale House is to be rented for a song. The Long Firm are shutting up shop, and the house is only an incumbrance to them.”

Claude said nothing, but presently tossed Ada a letter he had been writing to George Villars, while they were talking. In this he resumed the position on the paper which he had occupied before, and begged Mr. Villars to give Wilson his congé.

That letter George Villars never received. Before it reached Sturminster—indeed, very shortly after Claude wrote it—occurred Fireside Tragedy number two.

A boy came from Fleet Street to Brompton—for Claude had been obliged to confide his new address to some one—bringing a telegram which had been sent simultaneously to the office and Portland Place by Wilson, from Sturminster :—

“Come down directly. Something dreadful has happened.”

There was no need to ask *what* had happened, for the same wires that summoned him to Sturminster flashed up to town the news of George Villars's sudden

death. It was even printed in the late editions of the evening papers.

The event had scarcely surprised those who knew Mr. Villars intimately. Poor Mrs. Villars wrung her helpless hands, and told Claude how dreadfully her husband had felt the blow, and how she had feared it would kill him, though she had not guessed that the end would be so fearfully sudden.

"What was the cause of death?" asked Claude, when Wilson and he were alone.

"Heart disease," was the reply. "We found him sitting in his counting-house over his books, which told him so dismal a tale, and to which he seemed positively chained as if by a strange fascination. I went to consult him on some matter of business connected with the paper, and saw him sitting back in his chair, apparently in meditation. I spoke to him, and on receiving no reply, went out again, thinking he had fallen asleep. I knew his rest had been a good deal broken, and told the clerks

not to disturb him. Half-an-hour afterwards I went in again, and was obliged to get an answer from him this time. Then I saw that he was dead, and found he must have been so for some while. His countenance was perfectly placid, just as you have seen it upstairs ; was it not, William ?" he added to the man who was carrying out the tray, after Claude had taken some refreshment.

"Yes, sir ; master looked quite himself," said the poor fellow, not trying to stop his tears. George Villars had been popular with all those he employed, and they felt keen sympathy for his losses, sincere grief at his sudden death.

"On the desk by his side I found this, Vallance," added Wilson, in a whisper, as soon as the man had closed the door behind him. He showed a small phial which bore the significant label "Hydrocyanic Acid. Poison ;" "but I thought it better to say nothing about it, at all events until I had seen you. What shall we do with it?"

Claude answered by deed instead of word, putting the bottle into the fire and pulverizing it among the burning coals.

"The local apothecary is quite ready to certify for heart disease, and I saw no necessity for an inquest."

"Of all things to be avoided. We have horrors enough already," answered Claude, though even he did not yet know of *Fireside Tragedy* number one. "The suddenness and seriousness of his losses are quite enough to account for Mr. Villars's death. He has always suspected a tendency to heart disease and predicted that he should die suddenly. It is possible that this circumstance accounts for our worthy apothecary's speedy solution of the difficulty, and also for Mr. Villars having the poison by him."

"No doubt."

"I will run back to town again by the night mail," said Claude, "and just give particulars to my wife and Emily: not that either of them are of the hysterical order to whom it is necessary to break the news

gently. Gules and Ethel will take up their abode here, and look after poor Mrs. Villars."

"Of course not a word to anybody about our secret."

"Not a syllable; why, Gules would want to bury his own father-in-law in a place where four cross roads met if you gave him an inkling."

Claude's greatest difficulty was as to how he should approach Clara. The breach between them had widened so terribly that even such an occurrence as this seemed scarcely to afford a pretext for an interview. However, he would return and see what was best to do. Again, in other words, he would go and consult Ada.

How marvellously instinct with memories of the past appeared each minutest detail of life at Sturminster! It seemed enough to soften Claude's heart towards his wife when he recollected how here he had first seen her in her early widowhood; how beneath yonder window they had sat and talked

during their brief engagement, and the magic hours that preceded it, when their hearts seemed trembling in the balance towards each other. But then it was here too in Pomona House, and in that very room with the jessamined window, that she had beguiled and tricked him in the matter of Ada's letters. That brought him round to the one subject which formed the pivot of all his thoughts now. He remembered the long hours of suspense and agony to which she had voluntarily and of set purpose subjected him in order to accomplish her own ends. If the spirit of him who, after life's fitful fever, was sleeping so calmly upstairs seemed for one moment to counsel peace, it was but for an instant, and he was glad to tear himself away from scenes and influences which, however faintly, suggested such thoughts.

When he reached the dingy lodging at Brompton that other intelligence met him. Emily Denton wrote without much anxiety, asking him of his wife's whereabouts. Had

she gone to Sturminster? There was a degree of mystery about Clara's movements which probably he could unravel.

"Ada," said Claude, very quietly, when he had read the letter, "Clara has gone."

"Gone! Not——"

"No. She is missing. She is not at home I learn from Mrs. Denton's letter. She is not at Sturminster, for I have just left it. She is gone." It has been truly said there is no such pathetic word in the English language as that monosyllable—*gone*.

"But Mrs. Vallance will be sure to come back when she hears of her father's death."

"I think not, if it be true, as I suspect, that she has fled—fled from the consequences of her own guilt. The same man whose malpractices have killed her father, wrought worse than death for you and me."

"But you do not suspect——"

"That they have gone together?—no. Clara is too astute—too discriminating for

that. If she had done so, the laws that now make us one should soon separate us; possibly may do so yet. But I think she will simply stay away so as to embarrass our movements. I should not be at all surprised if she knew something of Jones's whereabouts, and if he were close at hand; for I endeavoured to persuade our clever detectives that his voyage to America was pure hypothesis, and his journey to Liverpool very possibly a blind. They would not listen to me. Perhaps they thought a sea voyage would do them good. They were anxious I should not accompany them."

"But Mrs. Vallance——"

"I am going to ask you a favour now, Ada. I have appreciated the delicacy of your calling Clara Thornton Mrs. Vallance, so far. The necessity is now at an end. You are the only one who has the smallest right to that title." He took the little delicate hand in his own, and pointed to the motto on the ring as he spoke. "That

motto will yet come true, Ada, and in this world too."

"It has never been for one moment otherwise than true as far as I was concerned."

"But do you not realize the truth of what I used to say about the advantage of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and similar convulsions of nature, moral as well as physical? Does not some happier meaning seem to attach to the old words 'Faithful to death?'"

"No, dear Claude. It has always been so happy—always such a resource in all difficulties, that I cannot say even these tremendous events make it more of a talisman to me. I have always known and felt that I should be yours till death."

"And afterwards?"

"Yes, and afterwards. But now—I do not know why—perhaps because we have been hearing and thinking so much of death lately—that one word starts into prominence before all the others."

"Put it on one side, for it is a word of ill omen. For us there is no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying——"

"Are we not when we say so anticipating something out beyond the narrow frith we call life?"

"Yes, yes. But even here we must die no more to each other, separate no more from each other."

"Pray heaven it be so!"

Claude searched mechanically through the great house in Portland Place, examined the servants, and took counsel with Miles and Emily Denton. There was no need and if there had been need, there was no opportunity, for secrecy now. The history of their quarrel oozed out, though none knew its origin.

A few days, and George Villars was laid to rest. Bills were up in his eligible family mansion. The branch brewery in the Borough was sold, and Miles remained with the new comer as managing man. Another

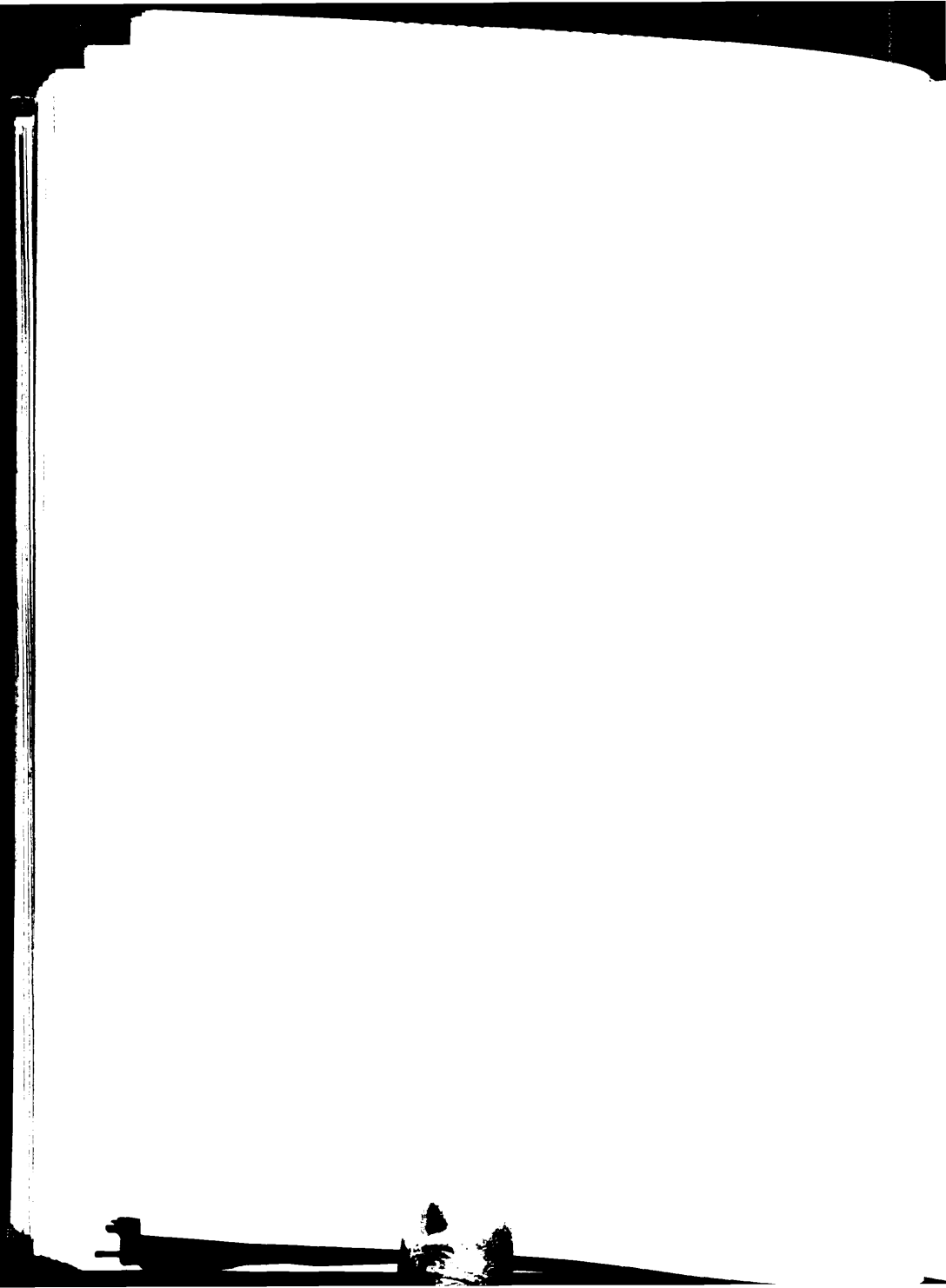
aspiring newspaper took the Fleet Street office of the *East Clodshire Gazette*. A new literary star succeeded Claude Vallance on the leader staff of the London daily. He, Captain Parkinson, and Ada were spending their last evening in the shabby-genteel lodging at Brompton, where the bill was up too. Next day he was going back as editor—and now, under George Villars's will, proprietor—of the *Gazette*, while the poor old Captain was to realize his wish “to return and die at home at last.” Of Clara Vallance nothing was known—nothing beyond what was expressed in Claude's significant monosyllable, echoed and re-echoed by Misses Tart and Souchong, and all the gossips of Sturminster:—

“Gone!”

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BROAD CHURCH.



BROAD CHURCH.

A Nobel.

BY

DR. MAURICE DAVIES,

AUTHOR OF "PHILIP PATERNOSTER: A TRACTARIAN LOVE STORY,"
"UNORTHODOX LONDON," ETC.

"To yield reasonable satisfaction to the religious sentiment in the emotional nature of man is the problem of problems at the present hour."

PROFESSOR TYNDALE'S *Belfast Address*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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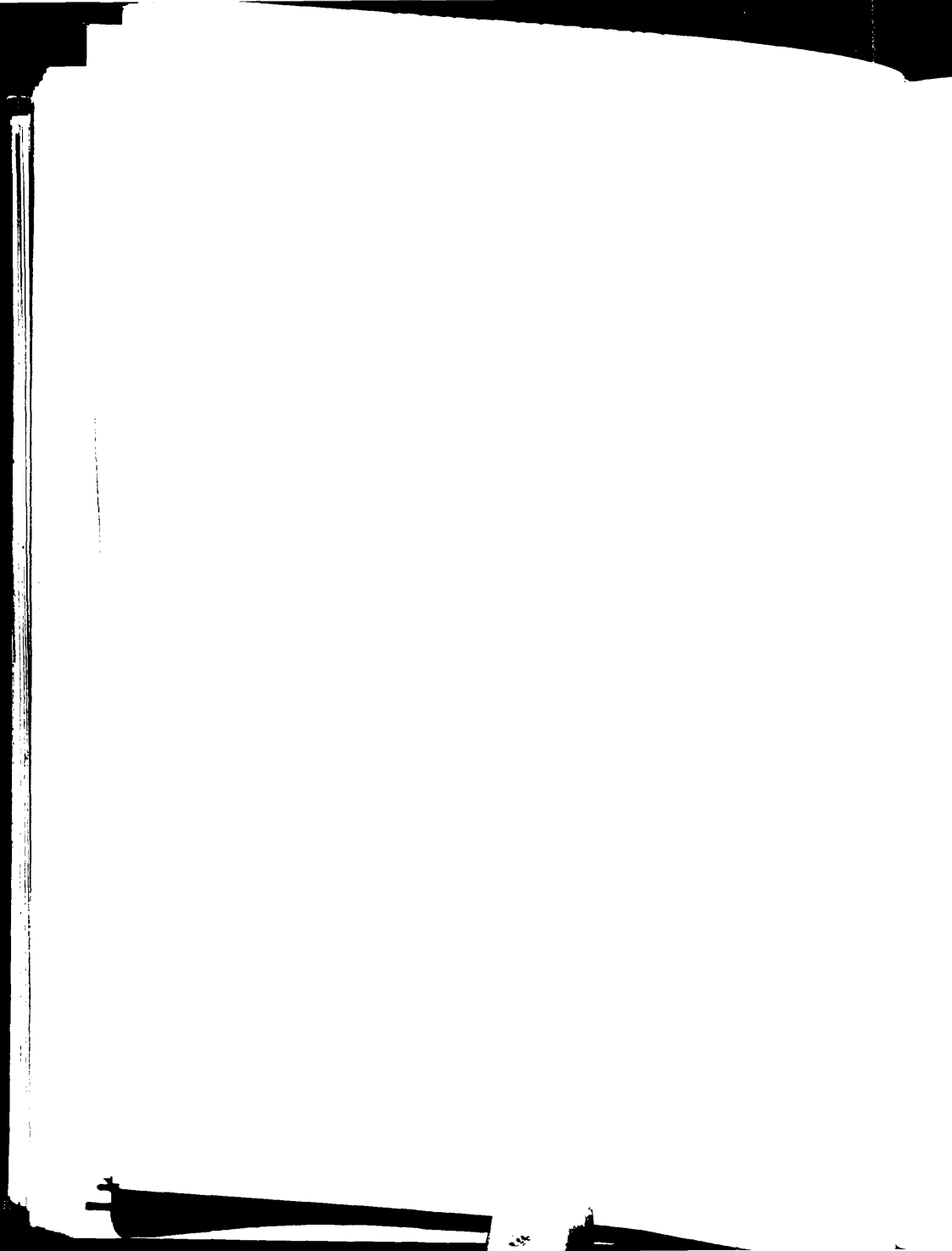
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BROAD CHURCH.

BOOK III. NEMESIS.

CHAPTER I.

A HERMIT IN SPITE OF HIMSELF.

WHEN the curtain rises on the third act of our drama, Claude Vallance is once more a denizen of sweet soporiferous Sturminster, and, as proprietor of the still flourishing *East Clodshire Gazette*, one of the most important inhabitants of that self-conscious little place. It is a fact that these overgrown villages rate themselves at about the same standard as Paris or Liverpool; and Sturminster was by no means backward in a recognition of its own surpassing merits. To go back to one of

these rural retirements after a lengthened sojourn in London, is a strange sensation indeed; a mingled notion of rest and boredom comes over one. It seems as though you might plant a cannon at the top of the High Street and fire stray shots all day without injuring any one or interfering with the ordinary traffic. A wild animal once escaped from Wombwell's Menagerie when that establishment visited Sturminster, and, after parading the streets, actually walked back to its caravan again, as if wearied with the monotony, and in despair of finding even a succulent child abroad whose bones it might crack in its capacious jaws.

Claude, of course, had enough to do as manager and working editor of a local weekly; but it was child's play compared with his London leader writing. There he worked always at high-pressure. Here he had time to meditate well over his matter. He had no great need to work now, for he was lonely and childless, and possessed of far more than

A Hermit in Spite of Himself. 3

he required for his simple wants. Yet he did write for the London magazines; and his work was of that best quality—namely, what flowed spontaneously from his pen instead of being written to order. He took up his solitary—might it not almost be said his widower's?—abode at the newspaper office. There was no open breach with Pomona House; in fact there was only poor harmless little Mrs. Villars there to quarrel with. But he saw less and less of her and of the Guleses, though the meetings were kindly enough when they took place. They professed to have no knowledge of Clara's whereabouts; and he was not aware whether they had been informed as to the cause of their marriage quarrel. That cause, however, remained, and still further complicated Claude's relations with Pomona House.

As soon as it could possibly be arranged, Captain Parkinson and Ada returned to Dale House, and Tabitha Tart took up her proverb forthwith.

“Hoity-hoity ! A pretty fellow to guide public opinion, as they say these newspaper writers do. It’s only one degree better than putting such a fellow in the pulpit to preach to us. Unfortunately, there’s no bishop to whom we can write anonymous letters and have him moved on now. I wonder poor Mr. Villars rests in his grave, when the betrayer of his daughter is actually in possession of his newspaper property, office and all; and directly his work is done there, posts off and spends his evenings at Dale House. It’s disgusting.”

That was always Tabitha Tart’s *tour de force*. Whatever did not square with the Tart ideas was disgusting. If poor Sarah Souchong hit upon a rather more juvenile bonnet, or smarter costume than herself, it was disgusting. A mild and elderly bachelor once upon a time seemed inclined to “make up” to Sarah, but Tabitha frightened him off, and dissipated all matrimonial ideas for the time being from Sarah’s mind, by denouncing each as most disgusting.

A Hermit in Spite of Himself. 5

The interesting Cœlebs might have earned a very different epithet had he made Tabitha herself the object of his attentions.

“Mr. Vallance’s position is a very delicate and exceptional one, Tabitha,” said Miss Souchong. “We spinsters cannot possibly appreciate it, therefore the less we say about it the better.”

“Delicate indeed! I think it’s quite the reverse. It’s disgusting.”

Judged indeed by a criterion even more merciful than that of Miss Tart, Claude’s position with Ada was questionable. Nothing was known of the intercepted letters or the private marriage. People only saw that his wife had left him from causes unexplained, and that he spent every moment of his leisure time at Dale House. The worst of this was that it compromised the poor girl. The Misses Evans sniffed and elevated their noses when they bore down upon her like an adult boarding-school taking exercise. Tabitha Tart thoroughly enjoyed coming into collision for the simple purpose of

cutting her. She made no secret of her satisfaction. She said it was sacrificing her feelings on the altar of society. Even Sarah Souchong and old Mr. Denton seemed to welcome her back to Sturminster under protest ; and the Evangelical Rector's wife scowled at her, handed her a tract and passed on her way rejoicing. The good old Rector even tried a mild expostulation with Captain Parkinson ; but found him far too childish to understand his gentle hints.

"I have come back to Combe Dean to die, Mr. Denton," he said, quite cheerfully. "I don't know that I shall trouble you just yet ; but I do hope when anything happens you will bury me yourself, and not let Gules bear me forth triumphantly with music and banners, dressed up with evergreens in a wicker basket, like fruit for dessert."

"I daresay he will have an opportunity of decorating me before he tries his hand on you. But, in the meantime, don't forget the hint I gave you."

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"Oh, a fig for your Sturminster scandal. We are out of its radius here, thank heaven."

"Nothing is beyond the radius of such a tongue as Tabitha Tart's. Be cautious."

When the Rector attempted a similar admonition in Claude's case, he received such a significant warning that the subject was an unpalatable one, he could only strike his flag and leave events to take their course.

"I am afraid you must be worried sometimes, Ada, with the attitude of these cats. I debate with myself, when I think of it, whether I ought not to emigrate, or at least go to the other end of England."

"You do not debate anything of the kind, Claude, because—because you know it would kill me if you were to leave me; and you know that the existence we now spend is passed in far too sublime a sphere for cats to have any existence in it."

"Mrs. Somerville says the lower animals, such as the dog and horse, survive in a future state. If the dog and horse, why not the 'harmless necessary cat?' Yet it

is so. In these grand old woods, which I vow are beginning to be gemmed with buds, though Valentine's Day is but newly past, one seems to live a superior life to that of the streets and alleys of Sturminster. But what did you mean by saying that my absence would kill you?"

"I verily believe it, and was speaking only the most prosaic fact. I do not feel strong. Even a walk to these dear old woods tires me, or would tire me, if I were not resting on your arm. See where we are——"

*"On revient toujours
A ses premiers amours,"*

said Claude, and then added, "Kiss me—you yourself kiss me—here, as nearly as possible on the spot where I kissed you first of all when our earliest love-troth was given and received. Now do you think you can manage to get as far as that other trysting-place where we were reading 'Festus,' and whence we adjourned to church for our impromptu marriage?"

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"It is only close by."

"Who shall doubt the need of sign and ceremony—the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace—during the continuance of our present state, remembering what a blessing, what a veritable life in death that most irregular marriage service has been to us in all our strange experiences?"

"I never doubted it."

"But I did—once."

The noisy little brook was still telling its old, old story, just as it had been then when they two sat beside it, just as when Claude himself gazed loneliness at it on his solitary visit. How strange this permanence in nature seems. The same things meet us, the same old sights and sounds that used to make our surroundings years ago; we so changed, they so changeless.

"Is it not so, dear Ada," said Claude, "we can fancy two spirits in a higher sphere, separated for a time by the inter-

vention of so-called death, at length meeting again, and hand-in-hand like ourselves passing with wonderment among the scenes of their earthly life?"

"Wonderment and happiness——"

"Wonderment and happiness, yes. It is not often one can put down the finger on a day and hour—at least on a present day and hour—and say 'I am purely and without qualification happy. I only want as my ideal of bliss to make this hour permanent.' But I could do it of this hour could not you?"

"Without doubt, yes."

"Are no elements wanting?"

"Perhaps I would rather not be sniffed at by the Dorcas Society, and I might wish the idea of possible separation were eliminated, as you once said——"

"And no such word as 'Good-night' in the book. That means matrimony. Still we are married, Ada."

"Yes; but——"

"No; I will have no buts to-day. Not

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all the Acts of Parliament in the world could make you one jot dearer to me than you are. After all, feelings are better than Acts of Parliament."

"Why Acts of Parliament?"

"I don't know; but these commonplace marriage 'contracts' as they are so properly called, always seem to me to smack of blue-books and red tape."

"But still the six Misses Evans could not sniff at an Act of Parliament."

"Then do you mean to say that if I were free you would commission me to go to Cyprian Gules and request him to repeat in monotone with the usual inflections, and with responses by the school-children, that interesting ceremony we went through in the church yonder? See, the door is open; let us go and look at another scene of our past existence. Could you do that?"

"Yes; why not?"

"Because then the Dorcas Society, instead of sniffing would sniggle, and say Miss Parkinson was obliged to put up with

rather an elderly husband—somebody else's leavings—and so on."

"Let them rave."

"Let them sniff. Don't 'but' me to-day, Ada. Let us be optimists, and perversely make up our minds that things could not under any circumstances be better."

"I scarcely know that we need do quite as much as that. Let us just adapt ourselves so far to circumstances as to say that, considering all things, this is as much as we could expect."

"And for what we are receiving be truly thankful. Now come home; the evening falls early, and I miss the Combe Dean roses from your cheek, young lady."

"Combe Dean roses will bloom with summer."

"I trust so, or I may get disenchanted you know."

"I thought you did not admire the dairymaid complexion either for face or hands. You told me so once, changeable man."

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“Whatever I may or may not have told you at any other time—revoking all else, as they say in positively the last will and testament, I like at present a complexion somewhat similar to uncooked paste—such is yours *ma chère*—and not innocent of freckles; but let her face be as it shall please Heaven, I am swayed by a certain white and somewhat scraggy hand. How could I ever question the truth of palmistry? I can sit hour after hour simply staring, like an idiot, at your hand, varying proceedings with an occasional squeeze. I wonder whether you laugh in your sleeve at this, or whether girls really do like being made a sort of fetish of as you are.”

“I think it’s rather nice, Claude.”

“I can quite believe it must be. Could you not fancy me a fetish sometimes?”

“I do; only I cannot say what I feel so fluently as you can.”

When they got home—for so they had learned to call it—they found the old Captain positively imbedded in the pile of

London papers which Claude had ordered to be sent on from the *Gazette* office, so that he might have a good long evening's work. He tried to impress Ada with the idea that she was equal to journalistic as well as ordinary literary tasks; but alas! the poems and articles of Cecile Valens had been even more spasmodic than those of Mrs. Miles Denton. She did not quite like vending Claude's wares as her own; and was now almost uncomfortably aware that the notion of her acting as sub-editor was a pleasant fiction only. She tried her best, and Claude, of course, was more than superlatively satisfied; but she had an idea that the fact of her doing it bettered what was done. The Captain was a wonderful hand at picking spicy paragraphs out of the American papers, or comparing the prices of wheat and barley with those which had ruled at the same period of the year during the previous portion of the century; and when Claude plodged home through the dark and muddy Sturminster lanes, at an early hour of the morning, he

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generally carried enough material with him to fill two or three copies of the *Gazette*, so that it required considerable weeding when he came to give it out to the printers.

Brabazon Lodge was a staunch supporter of the *Gazette* and a fast friend of the editor. The region was too lofty for the small tittle tattle of Sturminster to reach. Mrs. Tuft Hunter of course knew all about it; but it was not to her purpose to repeat it. Claude was thoroughly well in with the ducal household and Sir Charles Wentworth, and she liked friends at court. Politically speaking, Clodshire, from one of the most Conservative counties, gradually changed to the advanced Radical type; and everybody agreed that George Villars with his beer, and Claude Vallance with his former editorship had wrought the change and brought Sir Charles Wentworth on the scene to cap the climax. But the bulk of the Clodshire people were very accommodating, and adapted themselves capitally to the metamorphosis. Squire Atkins might

wail, and Gules simper sympathetically with the Dorcas Society, but the Duke and Sir Charles carried the day by a very large majority, and Claude was their presiding genius.

Then again as to the ecclesiastical state of Sturminster. It must not be forgotten that our narrative is in the main a clerical one, and demands more than ordinary attention in this particular. Curates came and went with wearisome iteration. Now appeared a dashing youth fresh from the university, who rode and shot, ran into debt and finally ran away altogether. Then followed a podgy working curate, with alpaca coat, gingham umbrella, trousers much too short for him and visible grey stockings above his blucher boots. The Dorcas Society in each case went through the varying phases of intense admiration and assurance that the pearl of price was found at last. To this succeeded disappointment and dismay, when the whiskered one vanished abruptly, or the grey worsteds made their earliest and most

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disenchanted appearance. They had muscular Broad Churchmen, emaciated Ritualists, and red-hot Evangelicals, but all were meteoric; and at last in sheer despair Mr. Denton gave up the Sunday afternoon and weekday services, doing all the rest himself with occasional help from Cyprian Gules or some supernumerary who crossed his orbit. All the while Claude was living as a layman, and the Rector durst not for his life ask him to take duty. The majority of the parishioners would have been only too glad to hear his voice again. Even Gules was coming round to the conviction that there were worse fellows going—theologically speaking—than his brother-in-law. He liked the theory of Claude's London oratory, as far as he understood it. He too would have gladly asked Claude to occupy his place occasionally; but the feline element prevailed, as it generally does, and Claude himself was only too glad to fall in with their plans and avoid rather than seek clerical duty.

It was not that he had drifted farther from faith, as he himself would have expressed it. On the contrary, among the strongly and strangely opposed elements in his clerical composition, faith was firmer even if more quiescent than of old, and the vague unrest had, to some extent, died out. There was no doubt that this result was in a great measure owing to his constant association with Ada. Whatever society may have to say about the nature of that association—and it was unquestionably indiscreet in the extreme—there was on both sides the consciousness of absolute purity, which entirely took the sting from hostile criticism; and at the same time, though he, at least, was old enough to have outgrown any romantic feelings, he was in just that crisis of his age and experience when men most need repose. His ambition was fairly, indeed fully, satisfied. He had made his mark in the literary annals of his day, and had acquired a handsome fortune in the course of a few years, which would

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have enabled him, had he been so disposed, to abstain from further effort during the rest of his life. This he did not wish, nor would he have thought it right, though it may be he had none of those natural belongings who make effort incumbent upon a man. On the contrary, his unfortunate marriage had utterly isolated him. The blight of childlessness seemed to have settled upon his former home, for no offspring had ever visited it after his boy died so prematurely. His wife had fled he knew not—nay, it were best to realize the truth, he cared not—whither; but her flight had set the tongue of scandal running riot, and had in a measure alienated him from her family, with whom he stood at present in most abnormal relations. He was actually living on the proceeds of the journal which George Villars's money as well as his own efforts had raised to its present almost unique position among the representatives of the provincial press in England. His wife, indeed, possessed a sufficiency where-

ever she might be choosing to hide her head; but he felt morally bound, and was himself perfectly willing, to contribute to her maintenance. He had indeed broached the topic through a solicitor to Mrs. Villars, and personally to Gules and Miles Denton, but each and all professed the most entire ignorance of his wife's movements, and evidenced the greatest unwillingness to enter in any way on the topic. The utmost that Mrs. Villars had ever said to him was, that she hoped and believed the breach between him and Clara would be healed in time.

Did she—her vision unobscured by passion or prejudice—foresee the result even more clearly than Ada had done, when she vaguely enough enunciated her belief that all would yet come right?

"Do you know, Vallance," said Gules, one day, when the two clerics were sitting together at slack time, in the office of the *Clodshire Gazette*, "I really think it is due to yourself, and indeed to our order in

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general, that you should have your position defined. You are under no ecclesiastical censure, and yet, if you will pardon my saying so, you are left most clearly and unequivocally out in the cold. I should see the Bishop——”

“Which Bishop, in the name of wonder, out of all those who grace the bench? Would you have me disturb once more the equanimity of my friend John of Babylon? or is it in the familiar walls of the palace of Glastonbury you would have me essay a breach?”

“I should approach both very respectfully; the former as the prelate whose informal censure first shook your position here; the latter as the one who should reinstate you, if you so desired it.”

“A brace of bishops, my dear Gules—two right reverend fathers in God at the same time! Really and seriously I am unequal to the fray. Besides, to be honest, I have exercised the mind of poor John Johnson, first in my schismatical services at

Brabazon Lodge, and then by the School of the Sceptics and Oratory of the Holy Spirit. The poor man was bound to notice it. The great mistake he fell into, was fixing on an imaginary scandal at first——”

“Which—you will, I am sure, excuse my saying so—has since grown to be a real one.”

“It is perhaps as you say; but the whole bench of bishops, if we could by any stretch of imagination picture them united on a single point of doctrine or practice, would be powerless to shake me on this subject. Had I been wavering at first, John Babylon’s coarse and transparently unjust persecution would have confirmed me in the way on which I had entered. I never did falter or waver, and—I tell you what, Gules, we are speaking more freely than we have ever done on this or almost any other subject before—and I will put you, as a representative of the family, in possession of two secrets, which may explain to you in some degree my else erratic course.”

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Claude then told Cyprian, to his intense amazement, the stories of the intercepted letters and the private marriage.

"I appreciate your delicacy, Vallance," remarked Gules, "in not circulating this painful history of the letters to your wife's detriment, because it would do much towards setting society right on a point where it is judging you and Miss Parkinson most cruelly. For her sake, it becomes a question of conscience whether you are not bound to offer some such explanation."

"I do not speak to you under seal of confession. You represent the family to some extent. Do as you will in reference to its circulation."

"Did Mrs. Villars know nothing of it?"

"Mr. Villars did, and I think most probably told his wife ; but I do not know. As far as I am aware he was the only person conscious of the way in which I had been treated, except those who had been instrumental in the occurrence."

"That is Oliver Jones and your wife."

"Precisely."

"Then with regard to the private marriage, that leads me to speak of my own affairs as well as yours. I am daily more and more inclined to think that our twofold system of the Sacraments is defective. In fact, let me make a clean breast of it; I believe thoroughly in the sevenfold system, and feel hourly more and more attracted towards the Church that enshrines it." He paused for a moment as if expecting Claude to say something, and then continued—

"You don't look shocked as I thought you would. Did I clearly convey to you my meaning? Do you realize that I—and I may add, Ethel too—seriously think of joining the Church of Rome?"

"I don't look shocked because I don't feel shocked in the least. I think it is clearly every man's duty to join that Church or body which most nearly represents his own religious convictions; and, if he finds none which approaches them, to

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stand aloof from all, as I am, to a great extent, doing."

"Then you would advise us to take the step?"

"Now don't be prematurely Jesuitical, there's a good fellow. I didn't say so. How can I, broadest of the Broad Church, presume to gauge the convictions of an advanced Ritualistic priest and dévouée? Thus much I will say, that if I had progressed as far as you have in the direction of Rome, I don't think I should stop. Rome has a logical position; so has scepticism, but I fail to see the resting-place between."

"Not in the Anglican theology?"

"Certainly not. If I decline to accept Transubstantiation at the hands of the Roman Church because it offends my private judgment and common sense, why should I receive the Athanasian Creed at the suggestion of the Anglican Communion? That equally offends my secular reason. Why again should I believe the

theory of Conversion as propounded by Mr. Spurgeon? I see no refuges but Rome and a School of the Sceptics."

"But the Papal Supremacy——"

"The Papal Supremacy, or the dogma of Papal Infallibility itself—what are these for one moment as compared with the cardinal point of doctrine involved in Transubstantiation? I could swallow Papal Infallibility quite as easily as the verbal inspiration of the Bibliolater. It is the doctrine which puts a visible present god on every altar that stands at the very apex of this venerable structure."

"But we hold the doctrine of the Real Presence."

"Dubiously and tortuously you wring it out of the formularies in defiance of the articles. You express your belief in it at peril of your position, and in teeth of the bench of bishops and Arches Court. If a fanatic who goes to Church once in his life for the purpose of persecuting you can only move the *vis inertiae* of your ordinary, you

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are nowhere. Individuals hold the doctrine of the Real Presence, just as individuals believe in Transubstantiation pure and simple, in the Church of England, but the Church as an institution is dead against you; and your Protestant Reformation which, whether you like it or not, gave you that Church, if pushed to its extreme and legitimate limits, culminates in Free Thought."

"Vallance, if I thought your words were true, I would secede at once."

"Can you gainsay them?"

"To be honest, I cannot; but tell me, if such is your opinion, where is the position of the Broad Churchman in this same Church of England?"

"Behold him—out in the cold, as you yourself phrased it. But then recollect the position of the Broad Churchman differs from yours in this important respect; with you everything depends on federation. We dare to stand alone. Your basis is the Apostolical succession. We are our own

apostles. You must have a creed—a consensus. With us each man thinks for himself, and the degree in which any particular man conforms to creeds or formularies depends on his own idiosyncrasy. Do you follow me?"

"Yes; it is a parallel difference to that in politics which makes the Conservative body a compact one as opposed to the Liberal, which is made up of many elements, and some purely negative ones."

"Roughly the analogy is a fair one. Then let me for one moment turn querist instead of respondent again. You, from your point of view, would consider my marriage with Ada Parkinson valid?"

"Most decidedly, if you consciously did a sacramental act in performing that ceremony."

"Which I most certainly did, for the sacramental character of the office had been discussed by us first."

"Then beyond the shadow of a doubt you were then and there married to Ada

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Parkinson; and now I see in your persistent adherence to her the strongest confirmation of my view. Your subsequent marriage was weak and wicked, Claude; and I cease to wonder it issued as it did, now I know how it was brought about. I cannot imagine how you could have entered upon it."

"Nor can I, now: except that I felt Ada was dead—dead to me, at all events."

"Happier perhaps if she had been."

"Happier for her, it may be. And yet no, I will not think it. Is not one hour of converse such as we enjoy cheaply bought by a sniff from a Miss Evans, or the cold shoulder of a Dorcas Society?"

"For a man, yes; but you do not know how women feel these things."

"I think I know a thing or two about women; but I may say in turn you, in your calm connubial condition, do not know what it is to recover, as if from the jaws of death itself, and under any possible combination of hostile circumstances, one whom

you have loved as I did—and do love—Ada Parkinson. But then you staid married people can't appreciate the raptures of us young lovers. I am off to Dale House now. Do as you like about what I have told you. I shall expect soon to have to announce the secession of a local clergyman to the Church of Rome. Take my advice, Gules, and look up Dr. von Döllinger and the Old Catholics. He seems really to represent your own views as far as I gather them from our recent colloquy—Catholic doctrine minus Papal Infallibility. That's about it I think, is it not?"

"Exactly."

"Then I see whither you are drifting, my dear boy. Shall we walk together to Combe Dean?"





CHAPTER II.

A LADY AT LARGE.

WHILE Claude Vallance was thus enacting the hermit on a modified scale, and with one fair spirit for his minister at Sturminster, his wife was living as a more veritable anchorite in the desert of London.

When Clara shut the door of the great house in Portland Place behind her, she literally did not know which way to turn. The world was all before her where to choose her place of rest. It was the most dead time of the night in the streets. Those who are accustomed to pace the flagstones at untimely hours can almost tell from the appearance of the streets what time of the night it is. The riot of mid-

night differs from the stillness of two o'clock; and this again differs essentially from the dead calm of three. The calm is deepest just before very early morning wakes the great world to life again. It was at this solemn hour that Clara stood houseless in the street, self-exiled from that luxurious home, and about to seek a new one, where she herself should be unknown and her past history a blank.

It would be difficult to analyse the precise motives which led her to take so decisive a step. Perhaps she had not articulately argued them out herself. Often, in the most crucial events of life, one acts thus on sudden impulse. Many of our most characteristic actions, indeed, could not be done if they were deliberated upon. This is especially the case with those persons whose temperament is that of Marcellus rather than of Fabius. Judged upon its merits, and with its pros and cons put down debtor and creditor-wise Clara's step was simply ridiculous. It was the act

of a maniac. Perhaps under any aspect it was madness. Sometimes of late, she had thought, and almost wished, that she were going mad.

In the recent contest between herself and her husband, pride had for a time stood her in stead. It was but a repetition, however, on a larger and more protracted scale, of the alternation of feeling she had evinced during her interview with him in the oratory. As long as others were by, and afterwards when he was by, she would command her emotions and carry herself bravely, indeed disdainfully; but when she was alone—in the long evenings or the weary night-tides, whilst he kept away from her, she gave vent to her feelings. She could not weep, she would have felt less if her sorrow could have found its natural vent in tears. She did not repent. She loved to syllable to herself the resolution that if what she had done were to do over again, she would do it. But gradually she felt that, like Cain's, her punishment

was greater than she could bear. Hourly she felt losing command of herself. She dreaded lest the floodgates should give way when others were by. Above all it was when she was forced to assume gaiety, at the receptions and the Sunday evening coteries, that the danger seemed greatest. She would have given her life to throw herself on Claude's neck and plead for forgiveness, beg for the love she had dared so much to secure ; but there was still the same rigid, relentless look upon his face that told her it would be hopeless.

And yet she knew he had smiles for others, or at least, for one other. When he came to Portland Place on Saturdays and Sundays, fresh, as she was aware, from Ada, there was a glow in his features which quite died out when he had been with her for an hour, though, at the same time his voice would be loudest and his laugh the merriest of all that merry assemblage. It was, she knew, an old theory of his that love was purely magnetic, and that when

true lovers met it was as when the poles were joined. Disunited, the current was broken. He was illustrating that theory himself now.

"I vow," said a mistaken Aborigine, on the very eve of the final coup, "you people are more like two great grown up hobble-de-hoys than elderly or middle-aged man and wife. Is that big husband of yours ever fidgety, Mrs. Vallance? and can you imagine what a fit of the blues is like?"

Is it not thus we blindly appraise the secrets of peoples' hearts by simply looking on the surface of their countenances, which may be made up for the very purpose of misleading us, just as the lapwing's devious flight decoys us from her nest? If words often conceal thoughts, what hypocrites are those looks which mask feeling!

Day and night this slow torture went on. She tracked Claude to the oratory, to the lodging-house. She found out he had taken up his abode there. At one time she

was prompted to enter and break up the Fools' Paradise; but again her pride prevented. It would be weak and woman-like. She would be anything rather than that. She was too proud to think of suicide. No; she would live it down. Perhaps hope told her, as it told her rival, that all would come right at last.

What if both she and Ada were right?

She absolutely paused a moment at the door, hesitating whether she should turn to the right hand or to the left, but decided on the former, and amid darkness which struggled ineffectually with distant dawn, she struck off northwards.

She walked quickly as if she were bound somewhither. The only denizens of the streets were policemen and cats. The intelligent officers stopped for a moment on their monotonous round, and honoured her with a fixed stare, but drew their own conclusions, and passed on. She was above suspicions of dishonesty—in its lower senses

of picking pockets, or breaking into houses, while she was too high and mighty for them to exchange greetings with.

"Where's your brougham, my fine lady," soliloquized one of these officials; "and are you so down on your luck that you can't afford a cab?"

She felt safer in the great thoroughfares than in the back streets; not that she feared being molested, but she did not want to attract attention. When she emerged from Park Crescent into the New Road, she again turned to her right and sped Citywards as a whole army of seedy clerks would do along the same pathway some hours later. Signs of life began to manifest themselves as she passed the great railway stations, where vans were carrying loads of newspapers—carrying *his* paper, *his* words, written only an hour or two ago—off to the early trains. By the time she got into the City day had dawned; and there is no stranger sight than to mark the struggling twilight creep above the roofs of the houses in the great metropolis. The

stillness of death itself was on the City proper; but the life of morning began to meet her as she left that part behind her again, and took one of the north-eastern roads to the suburbs. Soon the vast tide of business began to flow, and all converged on London as a focus. She had been walking for several hours now, and had had no rest at all during the night. It was not, however, until she was quite clear of the streets that she entered a little wretched roadside eating-house, more for rest than refreshment in the ordinary sense of the word; though she ate and drank on principle, knowing that she would require all the physical strength she could by any possibility command.

Doubling back on the north-eastern suburbs again, she threaded a whole labyrinth of second-rate streets, knocking at several doors of houses where lodgings were announced to be let. In a short time she had engaged two rooms; and, under pretence of going to fetch her luggage, invested at a neighbouring trunkmaker's in a port-

manteau, sufficient to contain the few necessities for immediate use, which she also purchased at the local shops. Then she returned, slept awhile, and sat down in her new domicile to think over her changed circumstances.

For several days her life went on in the most thoroughly mechanical way. She spent all her time in writing, at one time letters, at another articles for newspapers and periodicals. She communicated with a solicitor in the City, putting her affairs into his hands, giving no address, but saying that she would call at his office, and arrange for the transfer of such money as she could touch in her own right. She was beginning life anew; and, though she had resources quite sufficient to enable her to live in idleness, she settled it with herself that her best resource was hard work. To literature she had now served a good apprenticeship, and was sure of getting a certain amount of employment at that. She was—as one would expect—a vigorous, masculine writer,

possessing all the woman's brilliancy of imagination without a trace of the weakness which some writers of the so-called stronger sex libellously assert to be indicative of the female style. But she had other and larger designs than literary ones.

"If I make myself a name," she argued, "and especially a name in the religious—or irreligious—world, he will see that I can stand alone, or, at all events, without his support. Perhaps he will esteem me more highly then—possibly he may learn to love me yet."

Did she really believe that love was a thing of the head, then, rather than of the heart; that it could be swayed by popular reputation, or even that it depended on the volition of the man whose affection she coveted? How little did she understand of the electric sympathy which chained him at that very moment to the side of Ada Parkinson, with whom he seemed to have so little in common. And yet she herself had once, in converse with the Clodshire

squire, hazarded the conjecture that love might flourish best under conditions of greatest unlikeness between the lovers.

The news of her father's death came like a thunder-clap upon her; and her womanly instinct told her at once that her place was with her sisters, and by their mother's side. But once again pride put in its Lucifer-like veto. *He* would be there. She would meet her husband; and though it was just possible that their meeting might issue in a reconciliation, in deference to the custom of forgetting all breaches by the grave-side, yet such she felt would be only a temporary patching-up of the quarrel. On the contrary, her continued absence would embarrass Claude by the explanation it would necessitate on his part; and she would reserve her assault upon his heart until her plans were quite matured.

A certain district near the one where Clara had pitched her tent, was the very headquarters of London infidelity, the focus, so to say, of irreligious London; and here

she resolved, as soon as might be, to make her début. Her previous experiences at the School of the Sceptics had formed an useful introduction, but scarcely more than an introduction, to such work on a larger scale. She had made her mark there with an educated auditory ; but the assemblies of East London were as much a speciality as the Clodshire yokels. A series of brilliant articles signed "Thersites" in the *Weekly Scourge* attracted attention by their unsparing abuse of all existing institutions, from bishops down to beadles ; and, in due course, a paragraph appeared in the literary papers to the effect that we—the editorial we—understand the articles which appear from week to week in the *Scourge*, under the signature of "Thersites," are by Mrs. Vallance, wife of the Rev. Claude Vallance, editor of the *East Clodshire Gazette*. It is rumoured—so ran these oracular announcements—that Mrs. Vallance will shortly make her appearance on the public platform as a lecturer.

When Claude read these announcements, he knew they were addressed solely and singly to him, just as much as though they had been enclosed in an envelope and personally directed to him by name. Perhaps Clara would not have been altogether dissatisfied, could she have known the effect they produced. He could not help feeling a thrill of admiration for the independent spirit which prompted them. Once more he marvelled, as he had done a thousand times before, how it was that he could feel no sympathy with this bold free spirit, so thoroughly like his own, and such intense oneness with the little weak womanly heart, around which the tendrils of his affection were now daily and hourly entwining themselves more fatally. It was fortunate for him, though it scarcely squared so well with Clara's plans, that these announcements came just as he was leaving London for Sturminster. The cross-questionings of the Aborigines would have been disagreeable to him; but the losses and death of

Mr. Villars formed a sufficient excuse for Claude's absence from old haunts, and the sudden discontinuance of the Portland Place receptions, without any reference to the disappearance of his wife. In a little time bills decorated the windows of the eligible family mansion, and ere long it was taken by a bishop, and the scandal of Sunday evening suppers, and sound of Hansom cabs in the small hours, were at an end.

It is worth a journey to East London to see the crowds which assemble on a Sunday evening at what is pretentiously called the Lyceum, listening to the demolition of creeds and political institutions by advanced iconoclasts. Sailors from the docks, artisans in their working clothes, and people who look as though they had not a penny to spare in the way of "extras," actually pay money to come and listen to these powerful speakers. Surely it bespeaks a missing link somewhere, when these working folks will deprive themselves of their hard-earned pence to be present at such

exercitations, while they can scarcely be bribed by any rewards, temporal or spiritual, to come to our churches and chapels. So had Claude and Clara once argued. The former thought that the method of the Lyceum might be applied to the Church, and so the "masses" won to attendance there. Clara had long since taken in imagination a bolder flight, and was now reducing her theory to practice. All her previous experiments had but led up to this. Churches, she settled it, were effete, mere anachronisms in the nineteenth century. Faith was a word without meaning, and morals were an open question. Such were the familiar doctrines which East London now had put before it in a new light, and from the lips of a handsome accomplished woman. "Brayvo Thersites"—making a dreadful dissyllable of the name—was the verdict of the Orientals. "Ain't she a ripper?" was the form the encomium assumed in the mouths of the sailors and dock-labourers. As Clara stood

after her opening lecture to acknowledge the thanks of the president, and surveyed the long receding lines of rough but intelligent faces, she could not help feeling a transient glow of triumph; which immediately ran into the same channel as all her other thoughts and aspirations, resolving itself into the silent demand—

“What would Claude say to this?”

He would have said at one time, and well she remembered it, that a woman who could thus sway vast seas of men was fit to be his mate, and a help meet for him. He had inspired her with the very idea which she had now embodied, when, not so long ago, he had poured into her eager ear eloquent anticipations of such a future for her, shared with himself. She herself had shrunk, or seemed to shrink, from such a career as unwomanly; and it was his voice which led her to reverse her view, and look upon this as her proper mission. He had induced her to write, had applauded her earliest efforts at the School of the Sceptics.

His voice would then have been most enthusiastic in congratulating her on such a triumph as she had undoubtedly achieved.

But now ?

Now he was listening to the prattle of a simple country girl and the brainless twaddle of an old gentleman, whilst he helped the two in reinstating their household gods at Dale House. The future he was planning for himself was to settle down for life amidst these surroundings, and only sniff the battle of life from afar. True he admired the bold strategy Clara had adopted, but he thought of it as something in which personally he had no share. He was glad she had made such a position for herself, because he knew she would be comparatively happy in it, and so felt relieved from a responsibility which he might else have entertained. Thus did these two strange natures act and react on one another in their isolation.

Sitting in a corner of the platform at the time when Clara was receiving the congratu-

lations of the president and the plaudits of her audience, was a member of the Lyceum who had recently appeared on the horizon of irreligious London as mysteriously as Elijah the Tishbite, coming no one knew whence. Antecedents were not rigidly inquired into in this easy-going assembly, and Mr. John Jones from America, when he instructed the president to announce him in those somewhat vague terms as the lecturer for next Sunday evening, said that name and address would do as well as any other and recommended themselves to him by their simplicity. He was a man below the middle size, with a bushy crop of the brightest yellow hair, trailing in what is vulgarly supposed to be artistic style, all down over the collar of the black dress coat, in which he permanently clothed himself. He wore the very largest and darkest blue spectacles procurable for money, and with drab "pants," as he insisted on terming them, considerably too short for him, he presented a very grotesque figure indeed

when first he made his bow to that most critical audience. One outspoken gentleman in the body of the hall went so far as to suggest trouser-straps; but Mr. John Jones, in a crisp little speech, so cordially recognised the humour of the remark, and managed to say so many extremely wicked things in so few words, that he won the favour of his hearers by anticipation, and when he sat down amid ringing plaudits, the adventurous gentleman who made the remark about straps scarcely needed the sledge-hammer castigation administered by the president, to cover him with confusion. "He would have no personal remarks made on a lecturer there," said this Cleon. If such were done either in reference to himself, or one whom he invited, he would come down and put the offender out "like a bird." It was not easy to see the force of the simile; but the East-enders understood it, and knew he meant what he said too. They had often seen people put out "like birds," before now.

"And may I hope to have the pleasure of seeing Thersites among my audience next Sunday?" asked Mr. John Jones, looking languishingly at Clara as far as his blue spectacles would let him.

"Thersites is not as a rule considered an acquisition in any society, I believe, is he?" was Clara's reply. "But yes, he will come and give you a snarl, if you deserve it."

"*Palnam qui meruit ferat.* I will devote extra time to my oration during the week in order to merit approval."

"Even from Thersites? You know, though, if you read your *Scourge* like a good infidel, that he seldom praises."

"He is severe, but just. Will you pardon me if I express my wonder how, amid the experiences of a parson's wife, you managed to struggle to the position of freedom you have attained?"

"My husband, as you know, is an exceptional parson; and besides—as I daresay you know too—I have shot ahead of him. I have left him, and stand alone."

"Will you allow me to see you home?" said the lecturer of the future, not as by any means assuming an air of gallantry, but simply, as he made it evident, for the sake of continuing the conversation.

"By all means, only don't let me take you out of your way. You know, I presume, that I do not need any protection; but if you feel inclined to talk, come. I am sociable to-night."

"You ought to be, if you will allow me to say so, after the splendid reception they gave you just now. There is the advantage of physique in dealing with these people. The great unwashed are marvellously exacting."

"Especially *in re straps*."

"Yes, confound their impudence. I was strongly disposed to retaliate with soap. Do you know, Mrs. Vallance, if I may presume to substitute your real for your assumed name, I think it is a pity you have broken ground here instead of at the West-end."

"I hate the West-end," Clara replied with warmth. "Besides, I have worked the West-end, and worked it out I believe. I am only grateful to them for leaving me alone. I feared lest, when my real name oozed out, those who knew me there would follow me hither. I did see one or two familiar faces dotting the large audience to-night; but they were sensible men, who understood I wished to be lost—lost in London, and forbore to claim acquaintance with me."

"Specials come down to 'do' you for the papers, no doubt."

"And are at this moment engaged upon anything but a flattering portrait of me, I dare say. Poor fellows, they must trim, though I know from old acquaintance it goes against the grain. This is my domicile. Will you come in? Do if you like. I am above the convenances, and feel, as I said, sociable to-night."

Of course he went in, and sat, hat in hand, while Clara turned up the lamp and

stirred the fire. They continued their conversation, she standing by the mantelpiece without removing her out-door attire, except so far as to take off her bonnet, which she swung backwards and forwards while she talked. It seemed as though the lecturer *in posse* were smitten with a sudden admiration as he looked upon her; and, in very truth, it was not to be wondered at, if such were the case. Clara looked superlatively beautiful. The worry of the last few weeks had toned down and chastened the expression of her features, whilst, at the same time, the excitement and enthusiasm of the evening had flushed her cheek with a glow which had not yet disappeared.

"You will excuse me a moment while I go to the next room and take off my things, will you not, Mr. Jones? May I recommend you at the same time to stop this masquerading, and to drop the humble prænomen of John? By the time I come back I shall expect to find Oliyer Jones himself again."

He scarcely winced at the recognition; but when she had gone he quietly took off the flaxen wig and put it in his pocket, leaving displayed the bristly chevelure which he had always affected; while the blue glasses drawn from his nose at the same time exhibited the cunning pig's eyes, which looked closer together than ever. The dress coat and strapless "pants" he was obliged to retain.

"Now, then, you exceedingly estimable specimen of the human race," said Mrs. Vallance, as she re-entered from the bedroom, "what do you think is your chance of leaving this room otherwise than in custody of a police officer?"

"This," replied Jones, taking out of his pocket the agreement which Clara had signed, sealed, and delivered at Pomona House.

"You defy me with that, do you? What does it matter to me now?"

"I don't defy you," he answered, looking very much as though he thought the police

might be outside the door. "But I offer still to fulfil its provisions."

"It is past hope—past possibility."

"It is not. I will win back your husband's affections to you as surely as though I held the secret of the fabled philtre or love spell."

"Do it, and I will connive even at the ruin—the death—you have wrought in my family. Fail in it, and so help me Heaven, I will, at any risk, denounce you."

"If by this time next year your rival is for ever out of your husband's reach, and you restored to his home and heart——"

"I will not only forget what you have done in the past, but provide amply for your future."

He was promising utterly at random ; but he knew he could trade on this her master passion, and thus gain a year's breathing space ; so he said with all the impudence he could command, "It shall be done," and restored the document to its

resting-place in the pocket of the strapless pants.

"And you," said Clara; "have you not been in America? Did they not track you to Liverpool?"

"I've never been farther than Limehouse. I knew how to throw the detectives off the scent; and what's more, they knew I had done it. That was why they didn't want your husband to come with them. But I say, there was a nice piece of retributive justice, as the parsons would say, about the swag."

"The what?"

"The money. I turned everything into cash and carried it about with me in a small valise. Down East I went on the scoop."

"Would you mind talking English, please?"

"Well, went on the spree; and hang me if I didn't lose every sixpence down Ratcliff Highway one night. While I was having a spin round a shop——"

"May I again suggest English?"

"Oh bother!" said the offensive little narrator, who was transparently assuming a slang diction. "As I was having a dance round one of the rooms there, some sham sailors — wonderfully well got up — and women took every blessed thing out of the bag, filled it up again with rubbish that made the weight all right, for I tried it directly I sat down, and left me utterly unprovided for. Wasn't that a go?"

"So then, some people would say there is justice in Heaven yet."

"I don't know about that; but there seem to be symptoms of something remarkably like a *lex talionis*, or tit for tat in the neighbourhood of Ratcliff Highway."

"So your Transatlantic infidelity is professional then, is it?"

"It was the only line I could see opening up where references were not required. You and your husband had initiated me into advanced principles, and appeared to make

them pay. So I went in for that style of thing too."

"The cleverness with which you adapted yourself to circumstances is an earnest that you will succeed in the task you propose to yourself for me. Let us have some supper."





CHAPTER III.

SQUIRE ATKINS'S AGAPEMONE.



SUMMER passed by thus, spent on the part of Mrs. Vallance among the hot streets of East London, while Claude still luxuriated in Fools' Paradise amid the leafy Combe Dean woods or the quiet streets of Sturminster. It was to him more an enchanted land than ever; for, instead of palling with possession or spending itself in satiety now its object was attained, his love for Ada grew more intense every day, became more a part of his being. The hours when he did not see her, when she was not by his side, seemed so much time taken from actual life, and more purposeless than that which was spent in sleep. In the one case refreshment was

the result ; but in the other only vague unrest, and an irksome sensation of something missing. When he felt this, he would stop in whatever work he was engaged upon, gather up his papers and speed off to Dale House. It was no use attempting to trample down the feeling and work in spite of it, as he tried to persuade himself he ought. It simply would not be trampled down. He had to confess himself beaten and give way ; and he did so, it must be confessed, with a very good grace, and eventually without any preliminary struggle at all.

“ I don't want you to sit by me, if you've anything to do, Ada,” he would say. “ I would rather you did *not* talk to me, because, if you do I shall stop work, and that won't pay. I only want to be somewhere near you ; and if you feel inclined to come and take my hand occasionally, or even to give me a chaste salute, simply announce your intentions beforehand, and I shall be prepared to submit like a martyr.”

"Submit, indeed. I shall not trouble you; you need not be afraid, sir." But she would take her work and sit very close to him indeed, and such interruptions as he had anticipated did occur; but he did a capital hour or two of writing nevertheless.

"I'll tease these reviewers," he would say. "I'm writing a second series of poems rather more revolutionary of all their so-called canons than the last. By the way, there are one or two more critiques for you to read. Tell me if there is anything worth noting in them—from the organs where they appear I should guess not—and if, as is more probable, they are only abusive, burn them like the rest."

Claude never read a review of his books. It was not that he was thinskinne'd like poor John Keats, and dreaded being snuffed out by an article; but he feared lest the sneers of reviewers at those very peculiarities which made up his style, might tempt him to correct them, and so eliminate originality from his works. "Be yourself, or

nothing at all," he would say. "These critics would stretch us all on a bed of Procrustes." Consequently Ada used to read all the reviews, and label the papers containing them "Billingsgate," or "Useful," as the case may be. It was astonishing how many bore the endorsement of the fishmarket. Since Claude had broken up his establishment in town, and separated from his wife, he seemed to have lost his hold on the literary world. Some critics alluded to his personal history pretty plainly as an explanation of the questionable tone of his recent poems. They spoke of him as a brilliant meteor that had illuminated the firmament a brief while, and then gone out ignominiously. He had found his place, they hinted, as a country editor, and missed his vocation when he went in for poetry. Ada quoted this dogma to him; and he forthwith determined to go in henceforth for poetry more vigorously than ever.

"I wonder whether this kind of magnetic

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effect, which your mere presence has upon me, Ada, would have existed had we been married to one another in regular Act of Parliament fashion?" said Claude.

"You are always hazarding that conjecture, you dreadful old speculator. For myself, I cannot imagine why you should doubt it. If there were any real reason for doing so, people ought to think twice before they committed themselves to matrimony."

"Or marriages ought to be like leases, terminable at seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years. Shall I go in for divorce and try?"

"O no, Claude. If you were to seek a divorce, it would seem a disparagement of our previous marriage, which becomes more and more a reality to me every day."

"Yet if anything were to happen to Mrs. Claude, you would still go to church with me."

"I do not know——"

"Do not know! Ada, are you changing your mind?"

"You know I am not doing that; but we shall never be married, Claude."

"You have said that once or twice lately, darling. What do you mean? Anything more than that Mrs. Claude is in excellent health, and that you are rather a more cranky little party than usual?"

"It is not that. In fact I could not tell you what it is which gives me the information. It is simply, I suppose, that intuitive knowledge with which you credit our sex. But I have got to know it lately—not to think, but to know it—that marriage, as the world deems it, is not the way in which all will come right at last. Our marriage is a thing of the past."

"And of the future, too, perhaps."

"And of the future, too, yes; but not of any future that will be realized in this world."

He could not bear to hear her speak thus, as she had done frequently of late. He had such a preconceived idea of the truth of all she felt, that it made him

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quake when her vaticinations took this turn.

Disguise it as he would from himself, a shape of horror moved among the trees of the garden. A strange presence had come to mar the repose of Fools' Paradise. He would not realize it. He had not in so many words taken home the assurance to his consciousness; but it was there nevertheless. The roses never came back to Ada's cheek, nay, the lilies predominated more markedly than ever; but he determinedly shut his eyes to the fact. The face was more beautiful—or, if not more beautiful—dearer to him than ever. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. What thousands of Fools' Paradises that ancient maxim has served to keep green and glistening at the very moment when fruit and flower were on the point of being destroyed by the blasts of an apparently premature winter. When was winter ever welcome in these Fools' Paradises?

Sturminster had not known such an

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excitement for many a day as when it was announced, after a long period of suspense, that Squire Atkins had at length resolved to take unto his bucolic bosom one of the six Misses Evans. Which was the favoured virgin nobody knew or cared to inquire, because everybody felt that the six would virtually go together, with the probable addition of a mother-in-law as a make-weight. In this respect they were quite right. The same rumour which spread tidings of the impending marriage announced that Mrs. Evans and the other five would for the future reside with the happy couple at Shire Hall.

"A regular Agapemone, I declare," was Miss Souchong's good-natured remark.

"I've no patience with the man, to have been such a time arranging a simple marriage-business," said Miss Tart, more snappishly than usual.

"Miss Evans had patience you see, and behold her reward."

"A rich reward indeed. A great lump

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of a fellow who makes love about as languidly as a tortoise. It might have been all very well in the times of the ichthyosaurus, when a century or so more or less was of no practical account. Ugh, I hate such drones."

"Ah, that's how it is we are so long on the shelf, I suppose," rejoined Miss Sou-chong, looking slyly at her old friend. "What shall you wear at the wedding?"

The rest of the evening was spent in deliberation on this most important and inevitable subject; and very brilliant was the result when the two old spinsters joined the hymeneal throng, and saw Squire Atkins bear away his bride from the altar rail of Combe Dean church. The five bridesmaids got so mixed up with the bride, and Gules was so nervous under the circumstances, that even when the ceremony was complete, nobody was quite certain which were the "contracting parties." It is to be presumed that they knew themselves; but they all went off in such a posse that it

really resembled a wholesale marriage in Utah, rather than one of our cold-blooded monogamous affairs.

It was a significant circumstance, symptomatic of the views which Sturminster held in particular, and also of the tone of society in general on such topics, that Ada Parkinson was not invited to this wedding. Claude was; and returned an answer simply declining to be present. Ada and he scarcely mentioned the matter to each other, but he saw she felt it acutely.

"I tell you what I should like," he said one day, when he had been thinking over it; "I should like to go out to some new country, where scandal was as yet an undreamed of luxury, and a heavy duty levied on the importation of old maids. Why should we tie ourselves to this little village or this insignificant island? What say you, Captain?"

The Captain said nothing in direct reply, but quoted Oliver Goldsmith's beautiful lines, which always had seemed to live in

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his memory when he was far away from his present home :

“ As a hare whom hounds and horns pursue,
Pants to the place from where at first he flew,
I still had hopes, my long vexations past,
Here to return—and die at home at last.”

Poor Squire Atkins's troubles began with his honeymoon. No sooner had the happy couple gone off, than the entire household intimated to Mrs. Evans, who assumed headship somewhat too readily, their desire to vacate their posts that day month. Consequently, when Mr. and Mrs. Atkins returned from a peregrination which had seemed to each of them four years instead of four weeks long, they found no retinue of obsequious servants awaiting them ; on the contrary, the domestics filed out shortly before they filed in, and each of the five Misses Evans had to become a neat-handed Phyllis in the matter of domestic work. Mrs. Evans was a woman of many expedients and decided that she liked this. The Misses Evans did not ; but mamma was omnipo-

tent. She anticipated by some years the theory of "lady helps," and the poor Misses Evans had to do the helping. At the same time, Shire Hall became the recognised rendezvous of the Dorcas Society, who were all in full stitch ready to receive him when Mr. Atkins brought home his bride. An awful heresy thereupon crossed his mind that the mother-in-law was possibly a mistake. In fact the whole dream of wedded life seemed less rose-coloured than when distance lent enchantment to the view ; but still he bore it as philosophically as he could, and devoted himself anew to agricultural operations with the assiduity of a Trappist, though his home-life differed essentially from that of the cenobites in question. Perhaps Shire Hall rather resembled a community of Shakers.

Misery, it has been said, makes strange bedfellows ; and certainly it never brought about a more unlikely combination than when it caused Squire Atkins to affect the acquaintance of Cyprian Gules. There seemed as little as possible in common

between the two men; but Ethel still belonged to the Dorcas Society in its new quarters at Shire Hall, and, as Gules sometimes accompanied her, that brought about frequent meetings between him and the proprietor of the mansion, who generally sheered off when he saw the Dorcas phalanx bearing down. One day when they had thus evacuated the territory together (for Gules was wearied of the strife of tongues too) Atkins said—

“Tell me, Mr. Gules, how do you find matrimony answer?” He spoke very much as though matrimony had been some new kind of manure, about the virtues of which he had his doubts.

Gules gave him one of those searching interrogatory glances which say as plainly as any words, “Are you really asking for information, or do you only want to pump me?”

“No, honour bright, Mr. Gules. I really do ask for information. How do you like being married?”

"If I could be quite sure I was not violating ecclesiastical order, I should say I never was so happy in my life."

"No, would you now? But then Mrs. Villars doesn't visit you much, does she? and she isn't very much of the ordinary mother-in-law order when she does I should fancy; and then again your wife hasn't got five unmarried sisters."

It seemed to afford the poor fellow a positive relief to pour out his sorrows into Gules's attentive ear.

"You find your *ménage* a little trying, do you?"

"Well, yes, more than a little."

"Depend upon it it's only the strangeness of it. I felt just the same when I first changed my state. Ethel seemed to be always putting her bonnet down on my papers, and I found hairpins or some other female appurtenance all over the place; but I got used to it."

"Did you indeed? I'm glad to hear that, because perhaps I may too; only I got such

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an instalment of married bliss all at once. Five sisters-in-law, a mother-in-law, and a whole Dorcas Society is rather embarrassing all at once, isn't it?"

"Rather perhaps."

Now this confidence of Squire Atkins awakened more than an ordinary interest in Gules, and sent his thoughts wandering back to the idea of the married monastery which had been suggested to him at an early period of his own matrimonial career. Shire Hall would be a splendid place to try such an experiment in, and it was well stocked at present, only unfortunately it was principally with the female sex. Mrs. Evans would do for a Mother Superior, while he and his wife, with Mr. and Mrs. Atkins would form two of the couples. The Misses Evans could still retain their position as lady helps under the more appropriate title of lay sisters. He wondered what Claude Vallance would think of the scheme. Claude had tried so many experiments in ecclesiastical matters, on his own account, that probably,

even if he did not join the establishment, he would give his brother-in-law the benefit of his advice. He would like to trot off at once to Claude, only he was afraid of being chaffed. He had cautiously avoided taking any prominent part in the matter of Clara and Claude, because he did not want again to complicate his relations with his brother-in-orders as well as in-law. He had, indeed, considerably more regard for Claude since he himself had taken to experimenting in religious schemes too. It was somewhat timidly, as one who felt himself on delicate ground, then, that he led the conversation up to the Married Monastery *via* Claude's own matrimonial *fiasco* one day when he looked into the *Gazette* office, ostensibly to bring some clerical items, but really to have a chat on the matter.

"It's a pity you and Clara didn't hit it, Vallance," he said, "because with your united experience, you could have given me great assistance in the Married Monastery

scheme you suggested once. We are going to carry it out."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. You mean you only proposed it in chaff. I know that; but Ethel and I thought the idea an admirable one. You know there is a married club; why not a Married Monastery? By the way, I don't know whether it should be called a monastery or a convent?"

"Clearly not the former—nay, very clearly the latter, if etymology is to have anything to do with the matter. But who are your partners in this scheme?"

Gules then told him that he thought of turning the Dorcas Society into a religious community, and Shire Hall into the convent. He felt sure he could reckon on Squire Atkins, who would recognise in this the best method of shelving his mother- and sisters-in-law.

Claude smiled, rather to think how contagious his own experimenting had proved

than at the intrinsic absurdity of the scheme.

"For myself I have done with ecclesiastical problems," he replied. "I have evidently no lot or inheritance in the Church, though once I hoped and thought otherwise."

"And will yet prove that such thoughts were correct."

"That may or may not be. I think my lot is to live and die henceforth a country editor. But, Gules, this scheme is hardly Catholic, is it?"

"That is just the point I wanted to consult you upon—I might almost say to make a confession to you about."

"I am no Padre, my dear fellow."

"Yes you are, by virtue of your orders; and as a brother priest I claim you *pro tem*. as my director. I am, Vallance, a Catholic at heart."

"Do you mean a Roman Catholic?"

"I do, though I object to the qualification."

"And I to the monopoly of the title. It

is the only sense in which I am a Protestant ; I do protest against the most exclusive of sects appropriating a title which assumes universality for those to whom it is applied."

"We won't quarrel about names. I mean that I have got to see Ritualism has no logical *locus standi*. It must be, as you have often said to me, Catholicism in the sense of the term against which you protest, or the broadest Broad Churchism. I elect the former."

"Exactly. But how can you possibly square that election with such an idea as the Hymeneal Convent?"

"I shall not renounce my individuality when I join the Church—if I do outwardly join it."

"Then surely you mistake the genius of the Church altogether. The first thing they would do, would be to declare your orders invalid, and the next to warn you that if you aspired to real orders, Ethel would have to be disposed of. As to the adoption of

matrimony into 'regular' life, that would be an abomination that would not be discussed. How would you get over this mass of difficulties?"

"By being the oldest of Old Catholics, as you the broadest of Broad Churchmen. I presume that in the earliest Christian commune, as I have heard you term it, married couples were among the communists."

"Beyond a doubt. I can point you at once to two illustrious examples."

"Who are they? The names do not occur to me."

"Why Ananias and Sapphira. A capital brace of patrons for your convent, by the way."

"Don't poke fun, you incorrigible joker. It is in the Christian commune I find my ideal of life, rather than in the Egyptian desert or the caves of the anchorite. What do you say to this, now?"

"I say, do as I did. Try it."

"You say so as if the trial were certain to result in disappointment."

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"No, I do not; though I think it very likely that such would be the case. I would not throw cold water on any scheme simply because it did not recommend itself to my sympathies. That is the very attitude of sectarianism. To me the thing seems grotesque, just as no doubt my Oratory did to John Babylon. I can make allowances for him, but still I don't want to assume the amateur bishop myself. People, I daresay, would tell me, or tell one another and not me, that I am trimming; but you know me better than that, and will give me credit for honesty at least when I say I doubt this experimental religion. It requires wiser heads than yours or mine, Gules, to organize a religious movement. My own escapades have taught me this, and taught me too that there is no teacher like experience. Therefore I say go in for this scheme."

"But you seem to say go in and lose rather than go in and win. I expected more encouragement from you, Vallance."

“I say go in prepared either to win or lose. I speak honestly to you, and advise you as I would take counsel with myself. When you have reduced your theory to practice, let me see the Convent at work, and I will tell you just as frankly as I have now done, what I think its probabilities of success or failure.”

Mr. Atkins was overjoyed when Gules unbosomed his scheme to him, and began to study the Monastic Orders forthwith. He would have lived like St. Simon Stylites on the top of a pillar to get out of the way of his mother-in-law; but this plan of Gules's offered a pacific solution of that difficulty which recommended itself strongly to the squire's judgment.

By a slightly Jesuitical policy on the part of Cyprian and Ethel, it was determined that there should be no reference to any “Catholic” ideas in this new establishment; for the Dorcas Society were liable to be scared by any decidedly Roman influences. Gules was to defer all ideas of

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secession, and retain his position as Curate of Combe Dean, only transferring himself and wife to Shire Hall, which was soon stripped of its furniture, the dining-room turned into a refectory, the drawing-room into a chapel, and all the four-post bedsteads sold at a ruinous sacrifice in favour of six-and-ninepenny "stump" iron ones. The habits were made by the nimble fingers of the Dorcas Society, and when all was ready for the curtain to rise on the new experiment, Clàude Vallance received an invitation written by Gules on a sheet of toned paper with a Latin cross at the top, bidding him to be present at supper and compline office on a specified evening.

He presented himself in due course, and was not a little astonished at the metamorphosis which Gules had effected in the place, but still more in the people. Time was, as he well recollected, when the Dorcas Society were the pink of orthodoxy, and Mrs. Evans the most staid of that grave assembly. That good lady now appeared

in ecclesiastical costume so designed as to be something between the dress of an ordinary Roman nun and a respectable lady in slight mourning. She was the Lady Superior. There ought, according to the strict letter of the system, to have been a male Superior as well ; and Mrs. Evans by no means gave it out that her widowhood must needs be perpetual. Indeed, when discussing the pros and cons with Gules, she had in the most self-denying way offered to forego her individual inclinations, if it were absolutely necessary that she should be married. Gules, however, would not make this a *sine quâ non*. There were, he reflected, not so many eligible middle-aged men in Sturminster that one could be procured at a moment's notice ; and even if there had been one duly qualified, time might have been lost in getting him to see his duty quite in the same light as Mrs. Evans did. At the same time Mr. Atkins pointed out that it was essential to the success of the scheme that his mother-in-law should be

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A 1, or else Gules and Ethel might have made the couple of Superiors. Mr. and Mrs. Atkins had long ceased to take any prominent part in the Shire Hall arrangements.

The Misses Evans were much improved by their ecclesiastical habits, and Gules and Ethel were radiant with delight in theirs. Poor Squire Atkins had got fitted, or rather misfitted, with a gaberdine that resembled a clerical Ulster; but all the rest were pleased, so he was fain to be delighted too. And the supper, eaten on bare deal tables, was a very jovial one, rather resembling the repast of a private lunatic asylum, but a decided variety from the accustomed still life of Sturminster and Combe Dean.

During the period of preparation, Squire Atkins had developed a new and quite unexpected talent for Gregorian music. He had a voice like one of his own bulls, and the "tones" were just within the compass of his musical ability. He would spend

whole mornings playing them with one finger on the bass notes of the pianoforte, and thus became in time so *au fait* that he was constituted precentor, and shouted with a will as if proud of his new acquisition, when Claude, after supper, joined the Agapemone at compline in the quondam drawing-room.

"Now, old fellow, how do you think it went? and what is your opinion of the whole scheme?" asked Gules, when the ladies had retired for the night, and the three men had settled themselves in Atkins's old smoking-room, for a cigar and nightcap.

"I am seriously thinking of asking whether you have a spare cell."

"No, really do you like it though?" said Gules, delighted at Claude's approval, but not yet feeling quite sure that it was genuine.

"Isn't it jolly?" struck in Mr. Atkins, rolling himself up in his comfortable habit, as though it had been a dressing-gown.

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"If the Married Convent had done nothing more than develop that splendid organ of yours, squire, it would have been worth all the trouble it cost. It must have taxed you immensely, Gules, to elaborate and carry out such a scheme?"

"It did. The women were the worst. Atkins here came over like a lamb; and Ethel helped me with his wife and her sisters. Mrs. E. stood out—I was going to say manfully—for a long time; but the idea of being a Lady Superior was too much for her at last. Tabitha Tart took up against us, and prevented any of the rest of the Dorcas Society from joining: but I think we shall have Miss Souchong—good, sociable old soul as she is—one of these days."

"For Tabitha I should say 'more blest the lot of godly eremite,'" replied Claude. He had traced the rumours against Ada clearly back to her, and resolved to settle his score with her one of these days.

"Of course you understand, Vallance," added Cyprian Gules, "that this house is

only to be the headquarters of the order. If we find the idea spread, we shall get convents in all the great towns, and make each the centre of such good works as men and women can best carry on together."

"I quite comprehend; and from what I have seen and heard of your plan, I can certainly say that I believe it is far more reasonable than the cloistering men and women separately in communities by themselves."

"That's damning with faint praise, isn't it?" asked Gules, who was most sensitive as to anything like satire of his scheme. "You are not particularly partial to monasteries and nunneries, I believe?"

"On the contrary, I think the contemplative life a very lofty ideal—too lofty indeed for a state of probation. Active works of charity can of course be done best by communities, and certainly when once the celibacy of the clergy is eliminated, I do not see why a married order may not succeed better than an unmarried."

"Thanks. We will try."

The experiment soon failed ; and it was an interesting event which, as Claude had mentally prognosticated, dispersed the day-dream. Mrs. Atkins found duties more imperative than wearing a pretty habit, and singing compline. Mamma-in-law did her good service in the new calls that devolved upon her ; and Squire Atkins, having re-furnished Shire Hall in the most approved modern style, went back to his manures, and spent his leisure intervals in dandling his son and heir instead of playing Gregorians with one finger on the pianoforte.





CHAPTER IV.

AN EPISCOPAL INTERVIEW.

THE unanimous verdict of Sturminster in particular, and Clodshire in general, was that the inmates of the Married Monastery or Convent were mad, and that, properly designated, the institution would have been called the Shire Hall Asylum. Rumour was really less censorious in this instance than is often the case; and people who had known Squire Atkins in his bachelor days drew a very unfavourable inference as to the effects of matrimony from his early developments during his married life.

Clara Vallance in her metropolitan retirement was kept posted up in all these matters by Flower Fielding, with whom

she had put herself in communication directly Oliver Jones reappeared upon the scene. She was determined in the very first instance to make that small delinquent do justice to the girl he had injured; and he was so completely in Clara's power, that she could afford to bide her time. Flower had gone home; but her life was very wretched there, owing to the ill temper of her mother, who continually taunted the girl with the disgrace she had brought on her family. She consented to remain at Combe Dean, however, as long as Clara wished her to do so. Flower's one great wish was that she might be the means of bringing Claude and his wife together again. She felt deeply indebted to Mr. Vallance, she said, for doing what he could to right her cruel wrong, and was sure it was only some mistake that caused him and his handsome wife to keep apart from one another.

Clara laughed heartily over the details of the Shire Hall Agapemone, as conveyed to

her in the uncouth phraseology of the village girl and with all the comments of local gossip. She was sincerely glad her husband was not in any way mixed up with it. She did not even know that he had visited Cyprian Gules there; but dreaded lest his taste for such problems might have involved him in so extremely silly a venture. Common report gave it out that Mr. Gules had become a "Papish." He was away from Combe Dean, and Mr. Twister, the Bishop of Babylon's chaplain, was taking the duty, ostensibly for the sake of a little change, but Clara felt no doubt he was posted there as a clerical detective by their lordships of Glastonbury and Babylon acting in concert to spy out the condition of church matters in Combe Dean.

She was right in a measure.

Cyprian Gules had obtained leave from Mr. Denton to be absent for awhile, the rector being in no wise sorry to let this late scandal blow over; and Gules and Ethel had gone on a visit to the Dentons junior,

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in London, in order to reconsider their position, or, as Gules confidentially told Claude, in all probability to be received into the Church of Rome. Twister came like a *Deus ex machinâ* at the suggestion of the Bishop of Glastonbury, and with the approval of Mr. Denton, to occupy the post of curate in sole charge during Gules's absence.

Directly Twister came into residence he entered upon a vigorous course of walking exercise, as though he had put himself in training for some great event in muscular Christianity. He stumped the hamlet parish from end to end, and was especially obsequious in his attentions to anybody he knew to be well acquainted with the ex-curate, the Rev. Claude Vallance. By so doing he got about as ruinously wrong an account of the existing state of things in reference to that personage as it was possible for even the lying tongue of Rumour herself to invent. From Fielding and his daughter up to Captain Parkinson—and it

need not be added *his* daughter—he found one and all possessed of the most intense admiration and respect for the editor of the *Clodshire Gazette*. They felt he had been badly treated by his wife, and worse by his bishop; and the very climax of Christian feeling was supposed to have been attained by Claude in visiting so constantly at Dale House, though that imbecile old Captain Parkinson pleaded guilty to having been among the first to prejudice the former bishop against him, and to having moved away his daughter so as to prevent her marrying Mr. Vallance. Now the daughter was ill; and it was quite romantic to see how regular Claude was in his visits, though the whole neighbourhood had cut the Parkinsons from the fact of the questionable nature of the Captain's avocations having transpired.

"Really, my lord," wrote Twister to John Babylon, "we made a great mistake about this Mr. Vallance. He is an injured individual, and a talented man to boot. It

would be simple justice to set him right with the Bishop of Glastonbury, and an advantage to the diocese to put him in some prominent clerical position."

Sharp 'Twister! He knew the screw had been put on by Brabazon Lodge and Sir Charles Wentworth. Could it be that John Babylon coveted an archbishopric, or was he really anxious to make reparation for a hasty judgment? Let us hope the latter. At all events, from the nature of the instructions he received when he went down to Combe Dean, Twister knew the kind of letter John Babylon expected to receive from him, as if his lordship had dictated every paragraph himself. He really had no difficulty in penning such an epistle, for all people spoke well of Claude, except Tabitha Tart, and her testimony did not weigh, because she maligned everybody with the most charming impartiality. Even poor Mrs. Villars, shocked at the part Clara was playing in London, was half disposed to look upon Claude as hardly used.

In the meantime, Claude was leading his anchorite's life, and daily the shadow of that presence deepened upon the flowery path of Fools' Paradise. He would not see it, though it was matter of such common report that Flower Fielding startled Clara by writing to her, that Miss Parkinson was "going into a decline, they say, and Mr. Vallance is *so* kind to her." Clara dreaded this result; though it might have seemed to those who looked only on the surface that her rival's death would have been the most effectual way of removing the obstacle out of her own path. Clara knew Claude better. She knew that if Ada died, his affection would deepen a thousandfold, and a chivalrous sense of honour would prevent him from putting even her, his wedded wife, in the place of the girl around whom the tendrils of his love twined so mysteriously. She would, however, still hold on her course in London and simply wait. She could do no more; but she did really dread an event which a judgment less acute might have

considered the most eligible occurrence possible for one in her position. No doubt, she argued, the reports were exaggerated. She had only got the intelligence as a piece of Combe Dean tittle-tattle at secondhand from an illiterate girl.

The first intimation Claude obtained that the current of episcopal favour had begun to set in his direction, was when he received at his residence in Sturminster a little note from Twister, saying that he had been with the Bishop of Glastonbury, who had asked some questions about Claude. "I said a word or two about you in reference to the past," added Mr. Twister in the most enigmatical tone he could master; "and his lordship would be very much obliged if, when you are riding towards Glastonbury, you would give him a call. He does not like to suggest a formal appointment. P.S. I would lose no time if I were you."

The present Bishop of Glastonbury was a very different prelate from his predecessor, now Lord Bishop of Babylon. He had not

been a schoolmaster, or edited Greek plays—qualifications which were at one time said to be almost essential for attaining a seat on the episcopal bench; but he had been a hardworking country clergyman in a part of the country not so far distant from Clodshire as to make him feel out of place there; whilst his academical antecedents were quite sufficient to sustain the dignity of his exalted position. He was reported to be a Broad Churchman; but then the world says everybody is a Broad Churchman who does not carry a crosier and wear a mitre on the one hand, or write tracts on the Revelations and against tobacco smoke on the other. His close connexion with Brabazon Lodge since the Wentworth phase came over it, also accounted for his being credited with advanced liberal opinions. He was, in point of fact, a plain sober Church of England working bishop, and a Liberal Conservative in politics. But the distinguishing feature of the Bishop of Glastonbury was that he stood to a great extent alone. He had no

children of his own, nor any near relations, whilst even his wife—marvellous to relate—was not blest with a host of clamorous relations in the shape of curates on the look-out for benefices. The *régime* had changed in Glastonbury diocese, and the clergy began to have a vague idea that promotion went with some reference to merit in this favoured locality.

Claude Vallance had found it necessary for his health that he should take horse exercise. That is a very significant evidence of the advent of mid age, when a man finds it essential to indulge in horsemanship, just as the wearing a woollen comforter is of a still more advanced period. It was not for some weeks, however, that he found himself sufficiently near Glastonbury to justify his calling in response to the Bishop's somewhat indefinite summons. When he did so, that prelate received him very cordially indeed. He was a pleasant jovial-looking man, with a frank expression on his clear-cut features, and without a

particle of the hauteur which some of his right reverend brethren think a necessary virtue to assume, even when they have it not. He was reading his *Clodshire Gazette* with Mrs. Bishop when Claude was announced—for he had timed his visit on a Saturday, just after publication—and as the Bishop rose to receive his visitor, he said, in a fascinating tone of voice: “I am exceedingly happy to meet the editor of a journal that gives me such excellent information about my diocese—may I add, occasionally such excellent advice in its editorial columns? whilst at the same time its literary portion is so high in character, as to make one regret its circulation is limited to the county.”

Claude smiled at the Bishop's eulogiums, and having been presented to his wife, had some pleasant conversation on general topics, before his lordship said to his better half:—

“Would you kindly order luncheon in half an hour, my dear? I am going to beg

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the favour of just so long a conversation with Mr. Vallance. You do not mind putting your horse up, I hope, and according me this indulgence."

Claude assented; and could not help contrasting this urbanity with John Babylon's supercilious treatment of him. He had thence acquired such a suspicion of the episcopal order, that his thoughts immediately ran thus—

"His lordship is too civil. What does he expect to get out of me by this blarney?"

"I am aware, Mr. Vallance," said he, as soon as the door closed on his wife, "that I have not the slightest warrant for thus asking your attendance here. You will do me the justice to acknowledge that I solicited the favour in the most unofficial way."

Claude bowed.

"Just in the same informal manner, I may add, your name has on several occasions of late been mentioned to me in correspondence by the Bishop of Babylon, and

still more frequently by Mr. Twister, who, you are aware, is taking the duty at your old curacy."

"I am a constant member of Mr. Twister's congregation, my lord."

"Yes," rejoined the Bishop with a smile, "and there seems something a little incongruous, does there not, in such a circumstance?"

"Once it would have struck me so, but long usage has now made me accustomed to it."

"I am sorry for it. I may go a step further, and say the Bishop of Babylon is sorry for it."

"Indeed, my lord, I thought——"

"You thought, and rightly, that the Bishop of Babylon was responsible for the incongruity in the first instance. You scarcely estimate, perhaps, the amount of pressure that was brought to bear on his lordship. That brings me to the point. I want to ask you, as a friend, supposing I saw the way to offering you prefer-

ment, would it suit your plans to accept it?"

"I should have to consult others than myself; but I may say thus much, that if the preferment, about which your lordship no doubt speaks with studious vagueness, were far from this neighbourhood, it would *not* suit me to accept it."

"You have your heart in your journalistic work, I know. I could be sure of it, even if you had not told me so. Work so well done must be done heartily."

Claude had told him nothing of the kind. Was it possible he had never heard of Fools' Paradise? He would essay a bold stroke and try.

"You are aware that the Bishop of Babylon objected to my principles."

"Your principles, religious and political, are, in the main, my own."

"Not only so; but his lordship's avowed reason for revoking my licence——"

"Was a silly nine days' scandal, which Mr. Twister felt from the first was nothing

more, and which his inquiries have beyond doubt relegated to that category. You are, if I mistake not, on the most intimate terms with the very gentleman who once lent himself to the propagation of that scandal."

"I am."

"No more satisfactory refutation could be desired. Of your painful domestic trial I have no right to speak. That, I need not say, offers no obstacle to your being beneficed in my diocese. In a word, I have a plan for creating an incumbency in this immediate neighbourhood. I would rather not specify my plan more minutely, though I will do so if it is necessary to your answering me. May I hope that you would be prepared to give my offer your favourable consideration?"

"You will not think I am over-estimating my own value if I say, that before I answer even this preliminary question I must ask a few days for consideration?"

"Not at all. I am so very unaccustomed

to find any hesitation in the acceptance of preferment that your tone is quite an agreeable variety. Oblige me, at all events, by occasionally, when it quite suits your convenience, helping Mr. Twister in your old church. He has come for a holiday, and will be glad of such help. Will you do this?"

"With pleasure."

Yes, Claude Vallance was prone to confess himself dead beaten. The Bishop was far too civil. In himself this might have been natural, for urbanity seemed a portion of his constitution ; but he was evidently inspired by John Babylon. What could that mean? Was there any sudden reason for his wishing to tighten his hold on the Brabazon interest? Claude scanned the ecclesiastical intelligence to see whether the primate was ailing. Or, again, did they want between them to subsidize the *East Clodshire Gazette*? There was some motive, he felt sure, other than that which appeared on the surface. He did not believe in episcopal sackcloth

and ashes, and the coals of fire which had hitherto been heaped on his head were of anything but a kindly nature. He would think it over; which, being interpreted, meant that he would have a long talk with Ada about it.

Ada was as much astonished as Claude himself at the turn events had taken. She quite thought that their heretical friendship—to call it by no warmer name—had made them offensive in the episcopal nostrils. With equal lack of charity she speculated as to other motives than the penitential one put somewhat ostentatiously forward, which could possibly have influenced John Babylon so far to eat his own words at secondhand. But as to the answer Claude should return she was decided. He would find, when he came to grow old, that the clerical position was far more satisfactory than the journalistic. In newspaper work he would be obliged by-and-by, not for years to come perhaps, but eventually, to stand aside and let younger

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men do his work ; whereas the hoary head was so truly the glory-crown of the aged minister of God.

“ But you, dear Ada ; which would you prefer ? ” He could not bear to hear her dissociate her lot from his ; though he knew that in none but such a Fools’ Paradise as they were now inhabiting could those lots be united.

“ Claude, you must not think of me in this. It is far too serious a matter for you to let me complicate it.”

“ Complicate it, what do you mean ? What would the highest earthly fortune be to me if you did not share it ? ”

“ You know I cannot share it more closely than I do now ; and speaking from our present relations I should advise you by all means to say ‘ yes ’ to the Bishop. I would not pause to speculate about his motives. I believe it would be the best thing for you to accept. You can retain your paper or dispose of it. As for me, I own I should like again to see you in your

parsonic attire, and it would carry me straight back to the demigod era if I actually heard your dear voice in Combe Dean pulpit."

"Let us see what papa says. Captain," added Claude, "they want to put me into clerical harness again. The Bishop hints at preferment. What say you, shall I accept?"

"Take the goods the gods provide you, of course."

"Two against one, even if I myself were against it, which I am not, but perfectly dispassionate. Well, I'll tell Twister he may reckon on me for a sermon next Sunday, and the Bishop that he may venture to offer me preferment. It's quite refreshing to be able to talk to these potentates in the same condescending tone they assume to curates and such small deer."

"Yes, dear Claude, I am sure I am right," said Ada when they were alone again. "You will say to yourself one of these days, 'Yes, she was right.' You cannot have

failed to notice, Claude," she continued, laying a thin white hand on his, "that I am not quite what I was."

"Not what, Ada?"

"I mean in point of health. Those Sturminster roses never arrived."

"But they are coming next summer, Ada. We are well into spring now. We shall soon be out in the Combe Dean woods again, keeping our anniversary in lover-like fashion. For God's sake don't speak of yourself in the past tense."

"But I often think of myself in the past tense; often feel very much in the past tense indeed."

"Ada, you frighten me. You shall come away. We will go to the Isle of Wight or the south of France. There are roses elsewhere, if not in Combe Dean or Sturminster."

"I will never leave this dear spot again, Claude, never. I remember too acutely the bitterness of my last exile. No, I will gather my roses here, or not at all. If not

at all, you shall plant them on my grave."

"Ada, Ada! you must not talk like this."

"Must not? No, of course I must not. Why, you silly old fellow, I was only doing it to frighten you. I declare you are as impressionable as a big girl. There is a fat tear rolling down your cheek; wipe it off and write to the Bishop."

"If you ever scare me like that again I'll write and tell him to keep his preferments to himself, since I have made up my mind to live and die an editor."

"There now, who is talking of dying now? If you look very closely you will find a big tear oozing out from under my eyelid too."

He planned a little surprise for the Combe Dean people the next Sunday, letting no one know he was going to officiate until the time came. The people liked "Muster Twister" well enough; but when it transpired that Claude Vallance was at Dale

House in clerical attire, a good many people who would not else have found it convenient to be in church, made a point of going at a venture; and as soon as he was fairly installed in his old place, the adventurous sexton went out and warned in a lot of his admirers. By the time he ascended the pulpit, the church was just about as full as it could be.

In the quaint old pew he saw the white face of her whom he had in that very place made his own in such irregular fashion. All around were the faces of old friends; and when he took for his subject Hope reviving at Springtide, and pictured undying hopes living again when the span of miscalled life here below was past and gone, those who heard his voice falter and quiver, thought perhaps he missed one or two familiar forms who had been there the last time he ministered, but had now gone on to prove those hopes of which he was telling the survivors.

"Take heart, dear friends," he con-

tinued ; " how should I dare to say ' take heart ' if this poor fleeting life were all ? When we see the dearest droop and fade, and know the leaf must soon fall from the tree of life, though the red autumn-tide has not come, what should we do but for this hope of the spring-tide, this certainty rather let me say of the summer-land ? We are all of us more or less like the Egyptians on the eve of Exodus, there is none of our houses in which there is not one dead. I myself—as you know—since last I spoke to you here, have seen one live and die who was part of myself, whose span of life here below was so short, that his little day went down almost before it dawned. But I know he is now to me a potent minister of good. Every added day and year of my life I feel more and more the necessity of such knowledge. Bear with me if I thus speak of self. Here, in this dear old church, where I have spent so many happy hours, you would know, in any case I must speak from my heart. But

this subject, of all others, has a hold upon me now ; and you never know—we none of us ever know—how soon that hold may be tightened upon our very heart-strings.”

It was so he talked to them now without book or note, and all who listened knew that the words came straight from his heart ; though even he, perhaps, did not realize himself why they had such new force upon his lips.

Ada knew better than he did. She believed in inspiration—not that which secures verbal accuracy in a book, but which brings the fitting word to the lip, often without the direct consciousness of him who utters it. She had often noticed this in Claude’s writings—that he wrote of matters which he did not seem, as far as one could judge by his ordinary demeanour, to take home quite to his heart. Often too, of old, she had noticed the same feature in his preaching ; but never so much so as on the present occasion. Was there anything to give it a new emphasis to her, now the

demigod phase was quite over, and all she or he could dread was the disruption of their poor Fools' Paradise?

Many a cordial shake of the hand welcomed him back to his old labours again; many a simple voice expressed a hope they should hear him every Sunday. Twister was with him; and, far from feeling jealous, made up his mind to write and tell John Babylon the contemplated move was quite right. Claude Vallance was a power in the little place, not only as proprietor of the local newspaper, but as a favourite in the parish pulpit. They had been a long time finding it out, but perhaps the discovery would be the more sure since it had come so slowly.

Flower Fielding's next communication to Clara took her indeed by surprise. What new move was on the board now? If the Bishop had known of that mock marriage, would he have dared to let him profane the little village church by ministering in it? That was not exactly the shape the question

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assumed in Mrs. Claude Vallance's own mind; but it struck her as a nice rounded period in a letter, supposing she should have occasion to address the Lord Bishop of Glastonbury on the subject.





CHAPTER V.

THE HIDDEN HAND.

MRS. CLAUDE VALLANCE was not one of those persons who wear their hearts on their sleeves; and in choosing the remarkable career she had selected for herself, she gave it out that her intention was to abandon altogether her husband, and to follow her present strong-minded and independent career. It was only the merest outsiders she deceived by this assertion. Those who had seen her and Claude together knew that she loved the very ground he walked upon, and understood that her present strategy was only a somewhat more far-sighted move in the matrimonial game of chess than even ladies in general adopt. Women often delude them-

selves when they think the other sex so dull-sighted as not to see through their finesse in these love-matters.

There was one to whom she made no secret of her tactics, and that was Jones. It was convenient to be able to call him still by the old cognomen, as she would certainly have forgotten a pseudonym; and she told him plainly, in her frequent conferences with him, that she still looked to his fulfilling the agreement as the condition of her holding her peace. This was to compound a felony, she was aware; but had not he done the same when he connived at, and even suggested, her filching Claude's letters, and did not everybody know that two wrongs made one right?

It was with real consternation then, however she might simulate a different feeling, that she heard the intelligence of Claude's officiating once more in his old church. Anything that drew him back to clerical life tightened Ada's hold upon him; she was sure of that. But she had fancied that

his matrimonial eccentricities and especially her own flight, which she expected everybody to attribute to his faults, would have prevented the authorities from recognising in any shape so very black a sheep. On the contrary, people were disposed to sympathize with him, and the popular breeze affects even the regards of bishops. Some censorious people say their lordships are little better than weather-cocks in this respect.

"Now, Mr. Jones," said Clara, one morning soon after the events recorded in the last chapter "when you have removed your flaxen wig so as to keep your head cool, and withdrawn the blue spectacles in order to see what you are about, have the goodness to study well this letter of Tabitha Tart's—its diction, as well as its penmanship, and write to the Bishops of Babylon and Glastonbury protesting against the scandal of Mr. Vallance officiating in the very church where he went through a mock marriage with the woman for whom he has now deserted his legal wife."

"Excuse me, my dear Mrs. Vallance, I am anxious to do all you wish——"

"You must!"

"I must, perhaps; but is that quite a correct statement of facts?"

"Did I say it was? I only told you to write it. Have you qualms of conscience?"

"By no means; but I always made it a rule not to complicate any matter on which I was engaged with unnecessary lies."

"This is not an unnecessary, but a necessary one."

"You think so? Well proceed."

"Sign yourself 'An Aggrieved Parishioner,' that's all. Aggrieved Parishioners carry everything before them in matters of Anglican faith and practice nowadays; an Aggrieved Parishioner could fulminate a new Athanasian Creed to-morrow, with any number of damnatory clauses."

"I have still two grave objections—not personally, you know, but on principles of 'policy.'"

"One is?"

"They won't believe the marriage story."

"They will tax him, and he dare not deny it. The other?"

"You may think *is* personal perhaps. Mr. Vallance will know there is only one person who could have given the information. I shall be nabbed."

"Nonsense. As though you had not told half a hundred people."

"I haven't."

"I know you haven't; but he does not. Write."

So the letter of an Aggrieved Parishioner went to both the bishops; and long practice had made Mr. Oliver Jones so perfect in his penmanship that everybody attributed the document to Miss Tart. Twister had his doubts, and communicated them to the bishops; but they dared not question a document, anonymous though it might be, which was subscribed with that awful hieroglyph. John Babylon only rubbed his episcopal palms together, saying, "I'm glad we're out of this, Twister," and

then threw the whole onus of subsequent proceedings meanly on the Bishop of Glastonbury.

The consequence was that when Claude wrote a long letter to the bishop, saying he had duly considered his lordship's proposal, and felt that he could accept preferment in the diocese, the Bishop of Glastonbury was discomfited. John Babylon had proved a reed, though he insisted upon it that the revelation was fatal to Mr. Vallance; but he failed to point out to his episcopal brother how he was to retreat from the position he had taken. To eat his own words so very shortly after their utterance as he would do if he bluntly revoked his offer was too much even for a bishop, certainly for a Broad Churchman. He must temporize. How very fortunate it was that he had not named definitely any benefice to which he proposed instituting Claude. He could find legal difficulties in the way; or, in any case, a long time could elapse before a suitable sphere presented

itself. So prone we are to trust to mere time and chance to help us out of the difficulties in which we involve ourselves by our own imprudence!

Again Claude received a summons to Glastonbury, and still again he, on his part, delayed responding to that summons lest his lordship should think he was particularly anxious about the matter. When he did go, though the prelate was suavity itself—perhaps because he was so very suave—Claude saw that a hidden hand had been at work, and pretty well guessed whose it was, though he quite failed to appreciate the actual motive for Clara's opposition. He credited her with a mere vulgar spirit of revenge.

"You will, I am sure, excuse me, Mr. Vallance," the Bishop said in course of a conversation which was far too precisely worded on his side to be impromptu, "if I ask you a question."

Claude assented; though he could have added that he felt he had passed his last

episcopal examination prior to taking Priest's Orders.

"I am credited with being a Broad Churchman myself, as you know; and therefore you will scarcely mistake me if I ask whether you are inclined to attribute efficacy to the Sacraments of the Church of England *ex opere operato*."

"Certainly not, my lord. Perhaps, on the other hand, I am rather disposed to exaggerate the importance of Intention in the administration, as well as of qualification on the part of the recipient."

"Rather a strange position for a Broad Churchman, is it not?"

"That I cannot say. As a Broad Churchman, I claim the right to exercise my private judgment on this matter; though I believe I am borne out in my view both by the formularies and the articles."

"Possibly. May I now ask whether you consider matrimony a sacrament?"

Claude was clear about the hidden hand then; though he was not sure whether only

the scandal of his separation was being alluded to, or whether the bishop was referring to the previous marriage. He suspected the latter.

"Pardon me, and do not think me disrespectful, my lord, if I answer your question with another. To what do you refer?"

"You would not gainsay my right to examine the soundness of any gentleman to whom I may be disposed to offer preferment in my diocese."

"Moral soundness I should have supposed your lordship would have certified before making the offer. Doctrinal soundness would be formally attested at institution."

"But supposing in the interim between making the offer and the present time certain facts——"

"By all means go on to facts."

"Certain facts had come to light which would make a bishop, or, indeed, any patron hesitate."

"Then I should say the offer made can be withdrawn, or the person in question can be asked to explain those facts, supposing them to *be* facts. Will your lordship favour me with the case?"

"I will," and he laid before Claude the letter of the Aggrieved Parishioner.

Claude was deceived like the rest as to the handwriting, but simply thought that Tabitha Tart was in league with his wife.

"Is that a fact?"

"My lord, it is."

"I ask you, then, Mr. Vallance, not as a bishop, but as man speaking to man, do you think I could consistently welcome you as a beneficed clergyman to my diocese with that scandal hanging over you?"

"Perhaps not: but I would with all respect remind your lordship I did not ask for preferment. The offer came to me unsought."

"It did; but neither myself nor the Bishop of Babylon had the slightest idea of this when we discussed the matter, though

we did know other things which we felt had been perverted to your disadvantage."

"But this is fatal?"

"I fear so."

For himself Claude did not care much; though even he had felt his old penchant for clerical work revive once more when he got back to the familiar church. But he dared not tell Ada of the secret mischief that was still being wrought them. She had entered so thoroughly into this proposal, and, in her turn, so infected him with her own wish for his re-engaging in clerical work, that he knew this fresh difficulty would be a cruel stab to her. Unfortunately, she was well aware of his visit to Glastonbury, and he would not for the world mislead her in any way as to its result. This is a curious and beautiful characteristic in our association with those we esteem as well as love, especially when the faintest shadow of danger lest we should lose them appears like a dim shadow upon the horizon: we cannot bear to deceive

them, even for their good, in the smallest particular. The Bishop saw that Claude was disappointed, but of course inferred that it was only on his own account. He was determined to speak out boldly.

"I anticipated that this interview would only be, so to say, professional, my lord; though even as such our profession differs from any others, and admits, nay demands, closer confidence than would be justified by any mere matters of business; but our conversation has taken an unexpected turn, and in face of that letter I must trouble your lordship with certain private and personal matters about which I would fain have been silent. You have half the story, my lord, I would now ask you to listen to the whole;" and he told the Bishop the incident of the stolen letters.

"It is an exceedingly painful case, Mr. Vallance; and both the Bishop of Babylon and myself felt there must be something in the background to account for the very exceptional nature of your relations with Miss

Parkinson. We gave you credit for that—both of you—and closed our ears to the tongue of scandal. What I cannot understand, however, is the remarkable proceeding you thought proper to adopt in that secret marriage. You were not a young man, from whom one might have expected such a thing.”

“I was not, my lord; and I am a good deal older in years and experience now; yet, though I cannot justify my act on principles of expediency, or perhaps legality, I feel if it were to do over again, I should do it.”

“To what purpose?”

“It would be utterly impossible for me to say. Do we not act every day on impulses we should find it impossible to explain or defend to another?”

“True, true.”

“Without indulging in rhapsodies, which would be utterly out of place, I will only say I loved—and love—this lady as we only love once in a lifetime; I knew her father had mercenary plans for her marriage;

I felt that vague presentiment of impending separation, which the result proved to be only too correct ; and, whatever my idea of such a marriage might be, I knew the lady held it to be a sacrament."

"And that the proceeding you adopted secured her to you? That explains your motive to me, which up to this time I have failed to guess ; but even that does not justify your conduct, or, at all events, does not render it such that a bishop, acting in his official capacity, can pass over."

"That I can understand ; and as long as I could feel your lordship did not think me altogether reprehensible, I should be content on my own account to let official considerations decide in the matter of the preferment."

"You can also understand that private feelings and official acts cannot always be reconciled. Do not ask me to express my feeling on this matter, Mr. Vallance," said the Bishop, rising ; but he squeezed

Claude's hand in so very unofficial a manner, that the act said more than any words could do.

"There is yet one thing more to say, my lord, if you can excuse my prolixity; and it is a solemn one. Just as I felt the presentiment of that impending separation, so am I now conscious that this lady will not be with us long."

"Is she ill?"

"Her mother died of consumption; and though I cannot say the disease has actually declared itself in Miss Parkinson, yet her condition is such as to cause me considerable alarm. I scarcely know that I ought to say so. For her such a solution of our difficulties would be the happiest one possible; but on my own account I dread it," and his eyes filled with tears. "The matter of preferment can well stand over. I must give her something as near the truth as I dare, for the result of this interview, about which she is so anxious. May I hope your lordship will not require me to

cease altogether and suddenly from officiating at Combe Dean?"

"That is a very difficult and delicate matter. You know, I daresay, that Mr. Gules is wavering in his attachment to the Church of England, and we should not be at all surprised to hear he had abandoned it for another Communion. In that case Mr. Denton was anxious to cut off Combe Dean, and make it a separate benefice, instead of having a stranger there."

"And was that the benefice your lordship intended for me?"

"It was, since you ask."

"Poor Ada! What happiness it would have been for her."

"You need not, I think, cease quite suddenly, though I shall be sure to be worried by the Aggrieved Parishioner. Mr. Twister can be replaced by an active stranger who disdains assistance; or could you not manage—would it not even be prudent—for you to suggest change of air for Miss Parkinson?"

"No, no."

"Well, rest assured I will act with all consideration ; but I trust to you, on your side, to free me, as far as you can, from an embarrassing position."

Ada did not ask Claude whether any allusion had been made to the scandal of their marriage. She felt instinctively that it had in some way influenced his interview with the Bishop ; for he came back disappointed. Her one wish was to see him reinstated permanently at Combe Dean ; and in the morning when he set out for Glastonbury, everything seemed to point towards such an issue. It was not to be ; she gathered so much, but had no heart to ask more.

She even saw, without pretending to notice it, that Claude officiated less frequently than before at Combe Dean. Mr. Twister vacated his post, with real expressions of regret at the ill-success of his mission, for he owned that he had only come as Claude's "warming-pan." Gules

came back and gave it out that he was reprimanded by the Bishop for remissness in his duties, and henceforth was resolved to take every service and sermon himself, so as to give the enemy no occasion to blaspheme. He returned, however, arrayed in so much longer a serge coat than ever, with black silk stock surmounted by a narrow band of lawn, and a clerical hat with cords and tassels, that the people gave him credit for having joined the Papists already, and, for that reason, as well as their disappointment at finding Claude had ceased to minister, they gradually gave up church-going altogether.

"This can't go on much longer, Valance," Gules remarked, one Sunday after he had preached to a church full of empty pews.

"It must be disheartening, certainly; but why don't you declare yourself? You have no temporal considerations to fetter your movements. The English Church has evidently ceased to have any charm for you. Why not openly secede?"

"No, really, is that your advice, now?" said Gules, evidently glad to get somebody else's judgment than his own to act upon.

"I don't say it's my advice, because I cannot possibly know how far your opinions have advanced, or whither you would go if you left us. In fact, I don't think a man ought to need advice on such a subject. It is one of those where he must act from conscience, pure and simple."

"Just what I always tell Cyprian," interposed Ethel, who was present. "Why does he not openly say to all what I say to you, Claude, that we have been actually baptized and received into the Roman Church?"

"And yet, like heretics as you are, you still maintain external relations with the Church of England! I cannot understand it, and I tell you so plainly."

"Mind, we have only been baptized and received," added Gules, "since Ethel is determined to make you the repository of that secret. Really, Vallance, I did not feel

justified in delaying so much any longer. I could not die in peace out of communion with the Catholic Church."

"But why live another hour out of communion?"

"For my present position I alone am responsible. The authorities of the Church know nothing of my movements, and I am acting dead against the wishes of Ethel."

"In fact you are going in for private judgment considerably more since than before your conversion."

"That's what I tell him, Claude. He has ceased to be a decently good Protestant, and become for the time being a very bad Catholic."

"The case with a good many 'verts, I fear," was the comment of Claude Vallance.

"It has struck me whether I could not do more good for Holy Church by remaining where I am, and carrying on a little propagandism from within, than by openly seceding at first. What do you think?"

"I think," rejoined Claude with warmth,

“that such a method is utterly dishonest and disreputable, and one which I do not for a moment believe the authorities of Holy Church, as you term it, would sanction. It is on the contrary, I believe, the freaks of such as you—mostly ’verts—who are tenfold more Protestant than Stiggins himself, which bring down obloquy on a system where I, as a Broad Churchman, can see merits as well as faults.”

“You have a good deal of Catholic feeling in you,” replied Gules, quite ignoring Claude’s castigation.

“You haven’t a particle when you talk like that. One exposé of such tactics does more harm to what you call Catholicity, than a hundred ’versions do good.”

Cyprian Gules went on his own way, though, nevertheless; and it was not until he had preached Combe Dean church bare to the very sexton, that he confessed the truth, that he had been at heart a Catholic—in his sense of the word—for a long time, and even for a considerable time formally

received into that communion. Poor Mr. Denton was sorely troubled ; his better half, on the contrary, exultant and rejoicing. The mask had dropped off from both those model curates now. Mr. Vallance, the play-writer, by whom the Rector once swore, had turned out as Mrs. Denton laid it down all play-writers did—no better than he should be ; whilst as to this Jesuit in disguise, it had not been for lack of warning on her part that they had been favoured with the ministrations of a Papist in the pulpit of Combe Dean church for several successive Sundays.

Among the results of Gules's secession was the circumstance that he would insist on claiming Claude Vallance for a Catholic—by which he meant a Roman Catholic—on the strength of that secret marriage, about which he had been forced to tell him in self-defence.

“ You clearly recognised the sacramental character of Holy Matrimony, and more clearly still, the doctrine of Intention as

necessary to a valid rite. I should not have the slightest difficulty in deciding that you were legally married to Miss Parkinson, and consequently that your subsequent union with poor Clara——”

“Made me a bigamist.”

“In very plain English, yes.”

“Listen to him,” laughed Claude, “a ’vert of a few weeks only, he is talking with all the pomposity of a jurist skilled in the canon law. I don’t wonder that the veteran Romanists (one dares not say Old Catholics, for fear of being mistaken) laugh at the freaks of you ’verts.”

“Do they?”

“Don’t they? They are not by any means so fond of you as you imagine, I can tell you.”

“You seem to know so much about it, Claude, that one would fancy you must have done a little quiet secession on your own account. I verily believe you Broad Church people, like the aggressive Evangelicals, are better feeders for Holy Church

than the Ritualists. They do give their people a sham sacramental system, whilst you feed them on negations, which form such an unsatisfactory diet that they are sure to come to us in the long run."

"‘Us’ he says! meaning me and Pope Pius IX. Gules, you are the very type of a ‘vert.’"

"I am not at all sure of that. I should not wonder if I have a little too much of the private judgment element in my composition. If so, there is the Old Catholic School, which denies Papal Infallibility——"

"And leaves you free to assert your own. The very cultus for you. I should certainly join that body, or else go to Geneva, and fraternize with Père Hyacinthe, Madame Loyson, and little Hyacinthus."

"Chaffing, as usual. But no, I could not go straight to Geneva when I had newly sped to Rome."

"There is nothing like being original, my dear boy, in this inventive age. I’ve

tried a few things in experimental religion myself."

"And the result seems to be that you decide on original stagnation."

"I find myself very far adrift directly I leave the old moorings."

"Decidedly. But then which are the old moorings? I think I have got back to them."

"In the name of wonder, why? No; if you must go back to the original, and cannot quite face Hindooism, go and be a Jew, at all events. If I could find out the faith and practice of Melchizedek I would recommend you to try that."

"No," Claude concluded, "I find you may, when you leave the Church of England, or seek to improve upon her system, go farther and fare worse. So I fear you would hardly say that I, as a Broad Churchman, am much of a propagandist. That was an original remark of yours, Gules, at all events. I should, I own, have liked to work heartily once more

in the Church of England; but she won't have me, so I'll even go back to my pen-and-ink. There's no Athanasian Creed or Thirty-nine Articles among the Fourth Estate, at all events.






CHAPTER VI.

WHOM THE GODS LOVE.

AMONG the most curious phenomena of our nature is the fact that, when the great crucial events of life come down upon us, they often come so slowly and gradually, that it is almost impossible to note the epoch when first their presence became palpable; and therefore they fail to assume that revolutionary character which we should have expected, and which would certainly have been incidental to them had their advent been more sudden. They resemble in this respect the grey twilight of evening or of early morning in our temperate zone. The day and night seem to blend imperceptibly, and you cannot, as in the tropics, put your finger

down on one moment and say this is day, on another this is night. There are such events, of course, which come swooping down like a tornado; but most of those which chequer less exceptional lives, share rather the nature of the wind which bloweth where it listeth, and is perhaps more awful in the undemonstrative character of its resistless power.

And though you cannot mechanically and artificially note the advent of such changes and chances of mortal life, yet do they often come round in a sort of cycle, which forbids us to deem they come by chance. This assures us, on the contrary, they are the workings of some occult law which, for the time being, escapes our ken, but shall doubtless be plain and open to us when we see no longer as in a glass darkly. It was in the late Christmastide that Claude Vallance had first seen and loved Ada; and now, about the same period, the conviction stole upon him, not in any definite phrase, or as the result of a process of argument,





but flashing on his mind as an intuition, that Ada must die. It was not that vague fears had not haunted him before, or that the dread presence did not become more palpable by-and-by ; but here, as far as he could calculate in after years, was the shadowy horizon where the bright day of Hope and the dark night of Fear met ; and what amazed and almost angered him, was the quiet way in which he adapted himself to the knowledge.

Ada herself seemed to know it long before the others. To her first of all was revealed the mystic meaning of her own words, that "All would come right." When she took it home to her consciousness, her only wonderment was that she had ever thought there could be any other way of things coming right in this world. What but the merest patching-up of difficulties, the poorest makeshift, was the method Claude and she had devised of righting their cruel wrong?

"And yet," she would sometimes say to

herself, while her large brown eyes, undimmed with a tear, gazed out into vacancy, as she sat over the fire or looked through the window-pane across the wintry Combe Dean woods, "it has been a happy, happy time. Dear Claude, how devoted he has been to me! What will he do without me? How lonely he will be in his dreary newspaper office, and here with papa!" Then it was most of all she wished him to go back to Church work again. "Then," she would soliloquize, "his daily avocations would take him near my grave, and make him think of me; and his heart would be full of memories of me when he spoke Sunday after Sunday in his dear solemn voice about Death and Resurrection, and deathless life in Heaven."

It was long before Claude would take the awful knowledge to heart. He fought his doubts, yet without gathering strength. It was the doubts which grew stronger. At last the doubts grew too strong even for hope. He doubted no more; he knew.



Then for a long time each kept the knowledge veiled from the other. It required boldness indeed to touch such a topic ; and the woman was braver than the man. One day something led him to quote her assurance that all would yet come right, and she said, as calmly as though she had been discussing the most ordinary topic—

“ But you know it will not come all right in this world, now, don’t you, Claude ? ”

And he could only answer in a poor broken monosyllable—

“ Yes.”

His eyes brimmed over with tears for one moment, and Ada said nothing, but kissed them, and wiped them dry with her thin hands.

“ It is better as it is, dear Claude. There was no other way. I see it faintly now, and I know we shall both see it hereafter—there was no other way. Better that one of us should go on and peacefully wait for the other—*there*—than live the life we are living now ; perpetually wishing for some-

thing we have not, and cannot have, and provoking censorious tongues by the poor efforts we make to undo the wrongs of the past."

"But how can I wait?"

"Yes; I know that is terrible. I know it seems selfish when I say I am so thankful I have not to wait for you. A man has some distractions. He *must* live his sorrow in a measure down, and so the time of waiting will seem shorter. It would have been so dreadful for me."

"Thank God—yes, I can thank God that yours is not the ordeal. I dread it so myself that I could not have you subjected to it."

"Dear unselfish fellow!"

Captain Parkinson would not see it. He was full of plans for joviality that Christmastide, and almost disposed to be querulous that Ada could not carry them out. He had a hundred wild projects for the spring and summer, and said they were like two wet blankets when they held their

peace whilst he childishly unfolded his schemes.

"Captain," said Claude kindly to him one evening when Ada had been obliged to retire earlier than usual, "don't speak to Ada so much about plans for the future. Do you not see she is very ill?"

"Ill? Only a passing—— Good God, Claude! you do not mean to say she is going to die—like her mother? Yes—I saw that look on her face as she went away to-night. It was her dead mother's look."

"She has her dead mother's malady, father. I shall call you so from this time forth, for I have the very best right to do it. Yes, we shall be left two lonely men here before long, I fear."

"But, my dear Claude, let us do something. Let somebody see her. Let her try change of air."

"Somebody has seen her; not only our local man who, as you know, is constant in attendance on her, but the best physician I could get from London. Their agreement

is fatal. Change of air would do no good; and dear Ada—wisely, as I think—refuses to leave home.”

“And you never told me.” The poor old man subsided into tears, and reproached himself for not having found out what everybody else had seen.

“She will deem me careless, negligent of her health. She will even think me unkind. This very day I have been half reproachful to her for not entering into my plans.”

“She was only glad to spare you as long as possible what she knew would be such bitter knowledge for you.”

Thus did that strange household settle down to the terrible certainty; and gloomy was the anniversary of the day when Claude and Ada first met, just as their Christmastide had been shadowed by the coming event which so perceptibly cast its shadows before. Gloomy for them; but oh, so bright and peaceful for her! Day by day the local leech came; and there were

no delusive hopes held out, no hollow assurances of life and health. All he sought to do was to smooth as effectually as might be her passage to the tomb.

Solemn as those purple eventides at Bethany on the eve of the Passion were the springtide gloamings when the days began to lengthen out after the winter gloom. Sitting hand in hand with Claude, Ada loved to speculate as to what her new home would be like, and whether she should know her mother when first they met. The future seemed to be present and tangible as she talked thus. She had thoroughly imbibed Claude's belief as to the immediate supervention of the next life on this one; nay, she had got to blot out even in her consciousness that arbitrary line of demarcation. She ceased to speak of this life and the next, because now she knew, she said, they were not two, but one. It was only the place and condition that changed, not the life itself. The simile she used to love to linger upon was that of

her second Combe Dean life succeeding the troublous existence in Boulogne and London.

"You do not believe there is any suspension of consciousness, do you, Claude?"

"It seems presumptuous in me to school you now, Ada—you who stand so nearly on the threshold; but I have been always led to believe not. At most it will be, I fancy, but a brief refreshing slumber—a rest after the journey—though the slumber may be prolonged perhaps, like that of the little infant entering on this stage of being. The emancipation of the spirit from its earthly tenement is scarcely so wonderful as that."

"No."

"So materialistic do we naturally and of necessity grow, that we cling to these familiar forms and think them the self, the personality; as though our dear ones were not as much our own when the body is lapped in slumber; and what is that which we miscall death but a protracted slumber

of the body, that the spirit may be free to energize?"

Happy indeed is it when death comes thus, and finds those in whose circle he is to make a breach ready to welcome his advent as a blessing in disguise. The old man was at first disposed to be conventional in his grief, just as he was anxious for Ada to rush away from the comforts of home in search of health which could never be hers on earth again; but the two sufferers—his dear girl herself especially—bore their ordeal so bravely that anon he caught the contagion too. In his case it could be but a very, very little while before he joined his wife and daughter in the better home where there are no more separations; and, even in the case of Claude, Ada used to talk quite happily and peacefully of the period of waiting, and how she should prepare to welcome him. It was really only as though a family in the homeland was about to emigrate to a distant country in more than one detachment, and whilst together

talked anxiously and not without tears of the interval that should elapse between their brief parting and speedy re-union.

What else is death properly viewed in its relation to life?

Of course there was a gloomy reverse to the picture occasionally. Death would be a luxury indeed, if it came altogether without such alternations. There were days of depression and weakness when Ada would for the most part keep her room; but these were succeeded again in turn by morrows so peaceful and buoyant that they would have raised delusive hopes in those less reconciled to their position than the quiet sufferers at Dale House.

It was very touching to notice, too, how the tongue of scandal became paralysed, the voice of censure mute, in presence of the majesty of impending death. Even Tabitha Tart herself melted, and would often combine business with pleasure by stumping all the way out to Combe Dean to get the very latest bulletin at Dale

House. Presents of hot-house fruit and little delicacies came frequently from Shire Hall too; and a little file of maidens would troop down from the Agapemone to leave a comprehensive visiting card. "See," Ada would say, with a merry smile, "how I am appreciated now. This must have been what I unconsciously meant when I said all would come right even here. Who could have dreamed of all these virtuous ladies coming to visit the naughty girl that would flirt with a married man? That was how they designated me, was it not, Claude?"

"That was something like it, I think. But there is one consolation, their observations never caused us much uneasiness."

"No; but I am glad they have altered their opinion. I should like to leave a pleasant memory among those who knew me. Do you think they have found out about our marriage, Claude, since they have changed so?"

"I think it very likely. Perhaps Clara has set it circulating here."

“Perhaps.”

He knew, what she did not seem to realize, that it was the descending majesty of death which thus hushed the strife of tongues, and forced men, and especially forced women, to be charitable. We dare not bring our conventionalities and scandals to the bedside of the dying, the coffin and grave of the dead. Sometimes when Claude was forced to be away from Ada at the office, and resting his weary head in the intervals of writing, thought over all the past and the present, he credited the Sturminster gossips' unkindness with his darling's death, and solemnly and singularly cursed them ; but these passionate fits came less and less frequently upon him as the great calm of the glassy ocean seemed to diffuse itself by anticipation over them all.

One day in premature spring, Ada thought she might extend her midday journey in her bath chair beyond the confines of the garden.

"I should like to take papa to that very spot in the woods where we first became engaged, Claude, and where you first kissed me. You dear silly old bat of a papa, how blind you were! How nicely we took you in, did we not?"

"You did indeed," answered the poor old Captain, who was shambling along in the rear, and replied almost at random.

"This I believe is the very spot, for we have reconnoitred it since, have we not, Claude? Now I want you to kiss me here again, and also to take this ring back again, for my finger has grown so thin that it falls off. Take it, put it on your finger—there, where men wear their dead wives' wedding rings, and tell me, here where I promised it, that I have been true to death."

"And bear me witness Heaven, and those who stand by"—for even the poor old chairman was in their confidence—"that I will be true to my larger motto still. I will be faithful after death. I will never——"

"Stay, Claude," said Ada, with an energy they had not expected, and raising herself quite strongly in the chair. "Stay. I anticipate what you are going to say. I ask you not to say it. Here on the spot where I made that vow you confess I have kept, I ask you to make me—not the one you were going to, but another that I will dictate. Do you promise?"

"Whatever it may be, dearest, I promise it."

"Promise me, then, that when I am gone, you will seek out your second wife, or at least not avoid her if she seeks you out, and live with her as your wife."

"Ada!"

"Do you wonder at my request? Remember she loves you, Claude. She has proved that in a terrible manner. She has been unjust to me, but I am going where earthly injustice shows in its own smallness. I waive no claim. I am your first wife—almost your spirit-wife now, Claude. You will be mine for ever. Reward her great

love for you by reinstating her for the few years you may live together on earth. Tell her I asked this of you, when I am gone, not before. And now I am tired. Let us go home as quickly as we can. I shall not go out any more."

If ever Claude had doubted that angelic nature anticipates sometimes the dissolution of soul and body, or that the new immortal forestalled some of the noblest of its attributes, he could have been sceptic no longer. He never paused to ask whether his will assented to what his lips had promised. He took it as what it really was, a revelation from beyond, a faint foreshadowing of how Heaven's justice will round out into symmetry earth's poor travesties of it. He did not even ask whether he was glad or sorry he had made the promise. An angel had spoken. Should he gainsay it?

Then as though the worldly work were done, the span of days and hours seemed visibly to hasten to its close. Just as she

had said good-by to the dear old woods where their earliest love-making had taken place, so, one night when she went upstairs feeling weaker than ever, she cast a long loving glance around the cozy little dining-room where she had timed his talk with Chopin and Mendelssohn, and felt the demigod idea dawn very perceptibly upon her. She would never come down again she told them ; and they knew she was speaking the truth.

Not but what the end was still long delayed. Even after she had grown so weak that she could not raise herself in the bed, but had to wait for Claude's strong arm to lift her, and his broad shoulders to support her, she clung to life with a tenacity that seemed inexplicable. Over and over again she bade them good-by before she went to sleep, and rose from slumber so refreshed and invigorated that she seemed to have taken a new lease of life. She did not pass away as they expected—and almost hoped—in slumber,

but was conscious to the very last. She cried out—

“It is coming, it is coming. Now, papa and Claude take each a hand and hold me to the last. Hold me until mamma receives me from you. They are very near now. Oh, is all this glory for poor me? It is over now. Claude, papa—good-by. Say our old motto, dear husband——”

“*Ad mortem fidelis*,” said Claude, in a broken voice ; and the bright eyes closed in their solemn sleep.

The two men sat gazing long and earnestly at the wreck of their earthly hopes, and still holding the hand which lay heavily in their own. At length Claude took the old man, who followed him with the docility of a child, and, printing one kiss on the senseless lips, said—

“Come away, father.”

Through all that shadowed week which elapsed ere they laid her with her mother in the hamlet churchyard, the same ineffable peace seemed to prevail in the veiled

home. The men were at no loss to guess the source of such peace. They knew the beloved departed were with them. Claude read over and over again to the placid old listener the Golden Legend of the Great Forty Days; and so real did the communion become that they would scarcely have started had the dear familiar voices addressed them, or the sound of footfalls echoed on the stair. All was silent; but those stricken hearts learned what was meant in the expression "walking by faith, not by sight."

It was this consciousness that the beloved one knew all and saw all which made Claude welcome so gladly every little token of condolence which under other circumstances would have assumed to him the guise of empty compliment. Even John Babylon sent cards stiffly, but the good Bishop of Glastonbury so far departed from official rigidity as to ask Claude's permission to assist Mr. Denton at Ada's funeral. "Slowly all things right themselves," said

De Quincey ; and justice was done to the poor broken spirit at last, which had so truly come out of great tribulation.

Even Clara in her Eastern seclusion felt the good influence radiate to her. Flower Fielding heard from the old chairman the particulars of Claude's promise to Ada in the Combe Dean woods. The agreement would be carried out without Mr. Oliver Jones's intervention ; but Clara did not follow the too common example of kicking away the very ignominious ladder by which she had once hoped to scale the summit of her ambition. She had other plans for Mr. Oliver Jones ; so she kept him closely in tow, and waited for the result. It would scarcely be too much to say that she repented, or at all events she was sorry for what she had done to Ada ; though she was careful, even in saying so much, to hedge with the proviso that she would not promise to act differently if all had to be gone over again.

Happily it had not to be gone over again.

Some of us wish to recall our past years and think we should act differently in them guided by the light of later experience. How wearisome would be the monotony, even if the chances of reformation were manifold more than they are!

It was a beautiful day of early spring, when Ada was laid in the little churchyard at Combe Dean, close by the place where her strange wedding-vows had been uttered. Surely if ever a marriage was made in Heaven, it was that one; and it waited its consummation there. The trees were gemmed with budding leaflets, and here and there among the grave-mounds primroses peeped timidly. All told of the resurrection and the life; nature as it were supplementing the words of our most solemn service as they were falteringly read by the Bishop.

So they went and left her lying calmly in the quiet churchyard. Many and many an one stayed to take a last fond look at the coffin, and to cast on it their tribute in the shape of a wreath of dried flowers or a floral cross.

Not one but felt that the death was a happy one for her; they reserved their pity for the bereaved father and the stricken husband—most of them had learned to call him so now.

In a little time—oh, how little a time it always seems!—life got back into the old grooves again. The Captain mooned wearily about the house or the hamlet as though he were searching for something which eluded his steps. People who saw him shook their heads, and said prophetically his time would not be long. One day Mr. Denton found him standing by the grave on which the green blades had just begun to grow thickly.

“Ah, my dear Captain,” said the old Rector, cheerily, “looking at your new home are you? It won’t be long before you and I shall follow where your dear child has gone before.”

“And my wife too. Don’t forget that my wife went before Ada. He has not forgotten it. See!” And the Captain pointed to a new marble headstone which bore the

names of Ada and her mother with their old love-motto significantly altered to the plural:—

AD MORTEM FIDELES.

“If ever women were faithful unto death it was these, Mr. Denton; and I think I may say of myself and Claude that we are faithful too. Thoughtful fellow, he has left room for our two names on the stone, so that the motto may apply to us all.”

“He is a good fellow I believe from the bottom of my heart,” replied Mr. Denton. “A man whose powers have not been appreciated, and who has a singular knack of running his head against the milestones along the road of life; but this is a significant reminder that the present life is not all.”

“An uncommercial traveller along life’s highway, Claude loves to term himself. We both mistook him once, Rector, did we not? But this is your true leveller.”

Although Mr. Denton was not a time-server, there is no doubt that the sympathy

of the Bishop of Glastonbury, so remarkably evinced on the occasion of Ada's funeral, did very much to raise Claude in the Rector's estimation. Say what folks will, there is a certain prestige about a bishop in the general esteem.

Now came the time for the trial of Claude's last promise to Ada ; and who was to make the first advance ? The old Captain proffered his services as mediator ; but Claude thought it best to let things take their natural course. In his determination to carry out the promise he never for one moment faltered ; but not only were he and Clara both proud, they also waited for time to do his kindly work of healing, and felt that any forcing of events would be indecent and unsatisfactory. By the time action had to be taken it had become on Claude's side as well as Clara's a matter of inclination as well as duty.

Who will tell us that our motives are all our own, influenced only by the material surroundings which we can see and feel ?

Are they not rather swayed—those sensitive chords and fibres of our spiritual nature—swayed and determined by other and unseen influences? A year—nay, a few months—ago, who could have guessed that the one abiding purpose of Claude Vallance's life would be to meet the wife who fled from him, and whom of all living persons he would have, so short a time since, wished to avoid?

"It strikes me very forcibly," said Sarah Souchong, who was taking a sociable cup of tea with Mrs. Villars at Pomona House, "that Sturminster is going to be itself again. A cloud has hung over it for a long while, and my good but somewhat cross-grained friend, Tabitha Tart, has had it very much her own way. I prophesy brighter days, and should not be surprised if I were soon to receive an invitation for a pretty large family gathering at Pomona House."

"It seems almost too good to expect," replied poor Mrs. Villars. "Pomona House

has certainly been sad enough of late, since my poor dear husband's death"—and she always had a little fount of tears ready to percolate on the smallest provocation, when that event was alluded to—"but, depend upon it, when such a gathering does take place, you shall be the Good Fairy that gets the first invitation—you kind, cozy old creature, you."


"Very well. Mind, that's a bargain."





CHAPTER VII.


SOME INTERESTING PENITENTS.

T would be idle to deny that Mrs. Claude Vallance, when she heard the tidings of Ada's death, heaved a sigh of relief in her retirement, and felt that, after all, destiny might be turning in her favour. She had flourished fairly during her long period of expectation. Her pen had more than sufficed to keep her afloat without touching her private resources, and she was still a favourite on the Free Platform. Whenever the handsome lady made her appearance in the rostrum, she hushed the sometimes noisy attendants of the Lyceum into respectful silence; but after the novelty of her position had once worn off, it became very irksome to her.

Though she flattered herself that she was doing real honest work, she missed the refinements of her previous life, and in the long period during which she had expected the only event likely to restore her to her husband, her old prejudice against sacerdotalism was very much softened down. It is always difficult to determine how far such prejudices are in the female mind complicated with others of a more tender nature; and Clara now became alive to the conviction that her extreme dislike of Claude's clerical tastes was due almost solely to the fact that she associated those tastes with Ada, and so her woman's feelings became engaged on the side of those which she might have entertained as a merely religious partisan. But she asked herself whether she would like to see Claude occupying the platform at the Lyceum; and mentally decided that she would much prefer to hear him enunciating Broad Church heresies at Combe Dean or Sturminster. She did not realize—or not

to the extent she might have done—that her wifely, womanly feelings were now bearing her just as strongly towards sacerdotalism as they had formerly tided her away from it. She waited anxiously for the advance she never doubted Claude would make; ready, however, to meet him more than half-way when he condescended to do so, and quite prepared to make any number of concessions in favour of his clericalism.

But it was not lightly or soon that Claude could recover from the shock of Ada's death. When once the terrible tension was over, and the dear object of their sympathies no longer drew upon their care and attention, the reaction was more awful still. Go whither he would, strive to engross himself in business as he might, there was always the same vacuum. His one source of inspiration was gone. There was no one, when he had written anything, to act the gentle critic for him, as up to almost the very last Ada had. Even when



she was forced to keep her bed, she loved to hear him read some little poem he was sending off to the London magazines, or some more than usually pungent notice of local matters for the *Clodshire Gazette*. He did his work still; but it was listlessly and mechanically. The spirit seemed gone from it, just as the elasticity had departed from his step, and smiles came few and far between to his face.

The dear presence seemed to haunt him, and he encouraged it to do so. He loved to linger by their favourite spots in the woods, or to picture over and over again the strange scene of their marriage in the little church. Most of all did he delight to walk forth in the late summer evenings, while the old Captain smoked his cigar at home, and to gaze with a sort of fascination on the green turf and little headstone which marked the scene of her last earthly resting-place. His faith never failed or faltered that Ada was there with him; and sometimes the presence was so palpable

that he almost listened for the beloved voice, and stretched forth his hand to take the tiny fingers as of old.

“Why,” he would at such times ask, not in bitterness, though in anguish of heart, “should this mystery hedge around the condition of our departed ones? Who can wonder that men in all ages have endeavoured to fathom this secret, to take one look, however transient, into the realm of shadows beyond? *Is* it the realm of shadows? Is not this rather the shade, that the substance of life? Oh, Ada, can you not give me the slightest token to tell me my faith is true, and that you are by me? It would seem that where the strong volition, the strong belief exists on both sides, it might almost suffice to draw aside the veil of what is usually the unseen world. Ada, are you waking, watching, yearning, as I am; or is it really true, as they tell us, that you are sleeping beneath this green mound insensible to all I feel, deaf to all I say?”



The blades of the young grass bent silently before the summer evening breeze, and the leaves above rustled faintly; but there was nothing else that stirred, no sound came responsive to his agonized demand.

Anon the Captain would come and join him, trying to assume a happier tone than that which really represented his feelings.

"So, Claude, still at your post? What a comfort, dear boy, our time is not long. I shall go before you to our dear one, I suppose; but anyhow it will not be long for either of us."

"Thank God, no."

It would perhaps have been scarcely satisfactory to Clara had she heard this remark; but she knew Claude well enough to be quite sure that such a paroxysm of feeling would take place when Ada was removed, while she trusted also to the inevitable revulsion which she felt as little doubt would bear his affection again in the direction of herself.

In the meantime, as if doing her own penitence by proxy, and affording an anticipatory index of her return to what she once called conventionality, Clara laid her plans for the reformation of Mr. Oliver Jones, or rather for making him do something like tardy justice for one of his many sins. She sent for Flower Fielding from Combe Dean, took the girl under her own wing, and unromantically proposed to Mr. Jones Matrimony or Newgate.

"I do not need your assistance any further in the other affair, and you had long since outgrown the necessity of mine in the special matter which formed the subject of our late contract. We may as well, therefore, destroy those interesting documents. Hand me the copy you carry so persistently with you, please."

Jones obeyed with the docility of a child, and passed Clara the document, which now looked quite venerable from long service. She tore it very slowly and precisely into the minutest shreds,



"My own copy is also blotted off the face of the earth, so there is nothing more to be said or thought about that. I am in a humour, you see, for undoing the past."

"Evidently so."

"And now I shall require your assistance in the matter of Flower Fielding. You must marry her."

"Do you think, as a rule, Mrs. Vallance, these ill-assorted marriages answer?"

"That I do not pretend to say. Will you excuse my speaking plainly?"

"Of course."

"I take an interest in this girl, and an interest of a different kind in you. You are by no means the man I should select for her husband, even were you not under a cloud, except as a matter of necessity. Unfortunately, for her, this is such a case. I have not the honour of being acquainted with the ramifications of your family tree, Mr. Jones, though I suppose, from the name, your pedigree is a Welsh one; but I venture

to think that Flower Fielding will make you a capital wife."

"No doubt she would; but——"

"Pardon me. No conditional mood, and no buts, if you please. I mean business just as much as I did when I drew up the document we have recently disposed of. You shall do this girl justice, or I will denounce you to the first policeman that passes the house. You start; but you said you liked plain speaking in matters of business. When you are married, you can if you like, or if you think it prudent, desert your wife at the church door; but marry her you shall. I advise you, as a friend, *not* to desert her; but in that matter you shall act upon your own judgment. If you and she will emigrate, I am in a position to place you in safety, and to furnish you with some funds. Take my advice. Start fresh in a colony and carry a good wife with you."

"Well, I'll see about it."

"No; I have seen about it. Now you be pleased to do it. The banns have been

published at a neighbouring church here, where you were 'asked out' last Sunday without knowing it. Consequently there is nothing to prevent you from being married to-morrow morning."

"And Flower——"

"Is here, in this house, waiting to see what view her future lord and master may take of this matter."

"Shall I see her?"

"You had better; and, mind you, no tricks. No attempting to slip out of the engagement. Marriage I insist on; the rest of my proposal you can accept or reject at your pleasure. She will tell me all the truth about your interview; therefore do not attempt to outwit me. Come in, Flower. You and Mr. Jones can talk for a quarter of an hour, when I will return and learn what your future plans are to be."

Jones was a practical man, and saw no other way out of the hobble. Flower would suit him far better than a fine lady for roughing it in a foreign or colonial life.

He would put about as great a distance as he could between themselves and England; and when Clara returned he told her they had agreed to emigrate forthwith, the destination which he affected most at present being the then prospective dependency of Fiji.

"So far, so good. Really, Flower," said Clara, laughing, "I think you are too nice for him. I can't imagine whatever made you take up with such a mannikin. However, there is no accounting for tastes. Do you think you will be able to tolerate him?"

"I am very fond indeed of him, Mrs. Vallance."

It was such a thoroughly new sensation for Jones to hear anybody say they were fond of him, that it softened his heart towards Flower more than might have been expected, considering the circumstances under which their marriage had been arranged. He not only spent a very happy evening at Mrs. Vallance's lodging with his *fiancée*, but was punctual to his appointment

"What a lawyer you would have made,
Mr. Yellerson!"

"You have already had occasion to compliment me on my business habits."

"I have."

No sooner had these interesting penitents started for their distant home, than Clara received a surprise in the shape of a visit from Ethel, the first member of her family whom she had seen since her flight. She looked upon her as the herald of peace, perhaps the bringer of tidings direct from Claude; but in this she was doomed to disappointment.

Having narrated how she had worked like a detective to find Clara out, Mrs. Gules made a little pause, which Clara rightly interpreted as a sign that she was coming to business.

"Now I want to speak to you about that poor dear husband——"

"Yes."

"That husband of mine—Cyprian, you know: poor dear fellow!"

"Oh yes, Cyprian. But why poor dear fellow? What has happened to him?"

at the East-end church in the morning, where he was, to use his own expression, "turned off" by a sleepy curate in presence of Mrs. Vallance and the sexton, who signed the register as witnesses of the interesting ceremony.

The arrangements for the voyage to Fiji were then pushed vigorously on; Mrs. Vallance taking even more than necessary precautions, to see that Jones did not appropriate the passage-money, or make away with the outfit.

"You see," she observed archly, when she was declining one of his numerous offers to save her the trouble of making arrangements, "one can't be too particular in matters of business. There is nothing like doing things one's self. See, I have banked a small sum, enough to start you when you get to Fiji. You quite understand, it can only be realized by personal application on the spot?"

"What a lawyer you would have made, Mrs. Vallance!"

“ You have already had occasion to compliment me on my business habits.”

“ I have.”

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“ Yes.”

“ That husband of mine—Cyprian, you know : poor dear fellow !”

“ Oh yes, Cyprian. But why poor dear fellow ? What has happened to him ?”

"You mean to say you don't know? He has gone—in fact we have both of us gone—over to Rome. Didn't you know it?"

"Oh yes, I knew that from the papers; but I don't see why it should be poor dear Cyprian, or poor dear either of you, for the matter of that. They don't insist on a separation, do they?"

"Not unless Cyprian means to take Orders, which of course will be out of the question. I think that was discussed; but it would have involved my going into a religious house, or living as a widow bewitched; so I overruled it."

"And quite right too. But what have they done with Cyprian, then?"

"Why you see, poor dear fellow, he is so immensely conscientious, that he has confessed heresies enough to keep him in purgatory for all eternity; and really the penances they entail is something distressing. Perhaps he may walk along and fetch me by-and-by. I almost hope he may not,

because I think you will be shocked to see him. And now about your own prospects, dear. Have they brightened since the event of which we have all, of course, heard, though we have had little to do with Clodshire lately?"

"I expected—I may say I hoped, Ethel, that you might be the bearer of some news—some message."

"No. I have really had my hands full in tiding Cyprian over these dreadful penances. I know nothing; but I hope and believe all will be right, and that we shall all meet together again, if not quite as of old, still under happier circumstances than now."

"Perhaps."

"Nay, let us be sure that such will be the case."

"And now tell me, Ethel, how does your change of creed suit you?"

"I like it immensely. The externals always suited me, as you know."

"Yes."

“And as for the other part—I mean the penitential—I do that gently and gradually, instead of plumping out all my offences at one fell swoop, as Cyprian did. They really let me off very easily ; and I think would be glad to do the same with Cyprian, only he won’t give them the chance. It’s often the case with converts, the Fathers tell me. They overdo their part. As for me, I am just like an old stager.”

“You seem so, I must say.”

In converse such as this did the sisters pass a pleasant hour together, talking of old times and projecting future plans. By this means Clara’s sympathies were awakened towards family ties again, as they had already been drawn towards her husband by the mere possibility of regaining his affection. Was it possible that things were coming round? At all events her mind was being prepared for welcoming the change should it supervene. It was the time for confessions, she said. Everybody was confessing and repenting in dust and

ashes. She regretted her rash step in leaving home, repented bitterly the mal-practice which first of all led to these complications. And yet she cautiously avoided one most necessary element of penitence; she could not yet say that if the act were again to be done she would not do it. The only reparation she could now make would be in atoning to Claude for her error by a life of devotion to him. That, she knew, would be no penance to her at all. She longed, oh, how she more than ever longed now, to cast herself at his feet and say, "Forgive the past, husband; take me to your heart and home again."

Her life at the East-end too, exciting as it was at first from its novelty, had palled upon her. She did not turn round, like a vulgar renegade, and find out that the men and women with whom she had associated, and who had held out the right hand of fellowship to her when all the world turned its back, were utterly wrong and despicable. She had been agreeably surprised to find

how warmly they espoused the cause of poor Flower Fielding and helped her to get her wrong righted. But still there was a lack of that element which, in default of a better name, she must call the spiritual in the nature of her present associates. She was as broad, as heretical, as the most advanced of them ; but there was an aggressive iconoclastic attitude about them which, now at all events, found no sympathy with her. Was it possible that this formed another item of her penitence too ?

When Gules at length made his appearance, it was all that Clara could do to refrain from laughing, little as she was inclined just now to a mirthful mood. He looked utterly woebegone ; and in point of physical condition was far below that of his most ascetic period in Sturminster.

"I cannot compliment you on your appearance as a convert, Cyprian. You are evidently living under the parched pea régime."

"Well, yes, in a measure. That Married

Monastery scheme coming so very close upon my conversion requires a good deal of castigation, Clara."

"If it is to be whipped out of you, I should think the discipline ought to be a pretty severe one. Were I you, I should adopt Ethel's plan, and wipe out the old scores gradually."

"I cannot, I own, quite understand dear Ethel's lack of sensitiveness in this matter."

"I remember hearing the same thing said of a very distinguished convert indeed—I am afraid to mention the name, lest I may possibly have the wrong one; but it was one of the most illustrious of the Oxford seceders. People were astonished to find him so much less ascetic as a Romanist than he had been as a Tractarian—there were no Ritualists then. He said nothing was simpler. It was so easy now when you did wrong to 'square it'—I am afraid he did so express himself—so much easier under the new system than under the old. You do not find this?"

"I certainly do not. It is a very trying time of it to me just now."

"I can quite believe you," said Clara.

"Now, Ethel," continued poor Gules, "I am afraid I must ask you to come home."

"More discipline!" exclaimed Ethel, as she lifted up her hands in dismay, before bidding farewell to her sister. "I shall be so glad when this is over."

"So shall I," echoed Gules; and he seemed to say it from the very bottom of his heart.

It would perhaps be wrong to credit that Right Reverend Father in God John Lord Bishop of Babylon, with compunctious visitings of conscience. There is, no doubt, a divinity that doth hedge a Bishop as well as a King; and if it be not true to say that the prelate like the monarch can do no wrong, yet it is so seldom a Bishop is caught tripping—we speak of the Home Episcopate, and exclude for the moment Colonial Bishops—that cases of episcopal repentance are rare; at least it is rare to

discern with the naked eye any outward and visible signs of that inward and spiritual grace of penitence. It is not too much to say, however, that John Babylon would have been sincerely glad if Claude Vallance would have given him the opportunity of reinstating him at Sturminster, or promoting him in his metropolitan diocese. The Bishop of Glastonbury, a man of more genial temperament, had, as we have seen, made advances; but from one and all Claude stood rigidly aloof. He could make his face as hard as a rock—ay, as adamantine as John Babylon's own, when it pleased him; and he felt harshly and bitterly towards that ecclesiastical policy which, alarmed by an old maid's scandal, had prevented him from giving comfort to Ada during the latter portion of her life, by ministering in the little village church. No reparation they could make to himself would ever atone for that. He felt a savage pleasure in sulking at his newspaper office, like a clerical Achilles in his tent, and holding

himself aloof from any advances that might be made to him.

And yet there were times when he felt he should like to lay down the pen, shave off his grizzled moustache, and live and die curate or incumbent of Combe Dean. It was in the former capacity he had first known her. She had thought him—dear, simple girl—in her own sportive phraseology, a “demigod,” and looked for no greater happiness than that he should always remain there. That altar-rail—let the world scoff or censure as it might—had been the scene and source of the greatest happiness his life had known; and now in that same village churchyard were laid the remains of his dear dead saint. He looked upon it as an early Christian regarded the shrine of a martyr. It was, he felt, in sober truth the shrine of a virgin martyr; for he could not but feel that the cold fang of scandal had shortened Ada’s life, and he laid the burden of that act, perhaps unduly, upon the Bishops who now, meanly as he

thought, strove to cajole him, and so atone for their past misdeeds. He could be no party to such shuffling.

Mr. Denton was naturally selected to be the mouthpiece of their lordships' offer.

"You really will do me a great service, Vallance, if you can accept Combe Dean," he said. "I am an old man now and unequal to the work, while my experience of curates has not been happy of late. I seem to have fallen behind the times; you shot ahead of me when we were together; but years have taught us both wisdom, I think."

"I hope so in my case, sir, at all events."

"I fancy you have seen the impolicy of running one's head against stone walls. The walls are apt to get the better, and our heads the worse of it."

"Meaning Bishops by the stone walls."

"Well, I suppose on the 'Thou art Peter' principle one might say yes without offending those right reverend dignitaries. But I meant rather the system of which they are the

representatives. One sees in other matters—politics for instance—that it is no use to be too much wiser than one's neighbours. You are forced, almost in spite of yourself, to belong to one party or the other. There really are only two genders in politics or religion : the Whigs and Tories in one case, the High Church and Low Church in the other. I don't believe in the neuters."

"And yet they are a great fact."

"No; they are only pig-headed fictions, who refuse to own their party. You are a Whig and a Low Churchman, though you choose to call yourself a Radical and a Broad Churchman."

"What's in a name?"

"What indeed? I care less and less for names and parties, but I am still opposed to men running their heads against stones."

"Some of us are so confoundedly thick-skulled that really the process is far from painful, and produces only a pleasant titillation."

"That may be; but you do a deal of

damage to those less blessed by nature in this respect. Look at that poor crack-brained fellow Gules, to wit."

"Surely Gules is best where he is?"

"I don't believe he would ever have landed there if you had not shot off so violently in the other direction. He was a splendid curate, was Gules, and I really think as you were inadvertently the means of my losing him, you ought to make reparation by accepting his vacant cure if we turn it into a benefice, so as to save your dignity."

"Seriously, Mr. Denton, I believe you are mistaken. I have got imbued with printer's ink now, and have lost the odour of sanctity. What is more," he added, seriously, "the great incentive to labour is gone now."

"One incentive, but scarcely the great one, is it? Or even if so, do you not think she would have liked you to accept this offer? If she could speak now, what would she say?"

"She would say 'Go back to Combe Dean, Claude.' Well, I will think the matter over, and let you know my decision."

And Achilles went to his tent a shade less sulky than of late.





CHAPTER VIII.

GRACE ABOUNDING.

BUT whilst Achilles sulked in his tent, other influences of a more active kind were at work in and about Sturminster, that centre around which our interest naturally gathers. Its characteristic in ecclesiastical matters had up to this point been pretty well represented by the word stagnation, at all events until our hero had come to trouble the waters. From that time, though something more than a ripple had disturbed the surface, still it had not been stirred to its depths; but now the peace of the valley had fled. Agencies outside the venerable Establishment saw their opportunity, and wondered that it had never occurred to them to settle

down in such an extremely verdant pasture before this. That verdure seemed to strike simultaneously all the sects of a somewhat divided Christendom, and the result was the very reverse of stagnation forthwith.

In the first place down dropped Cyprian Gules one fine evening, accompanied by his wife and one of the most jovial of Roman ecclesiastics, the very man to get on with the rollicking East Clodshire farmers. Rome always puts the right man in the right place, and would not have made the mistake of entrusting the Clodshire hinds to an ascetic such as Gules, even if he had not been debarred from orders by a pertinacious adherence to his wife. The plan of the little propaganda was that Gules should live on his moderate income as a country gentleman at Combe Dean, and do his best to atone for the errors of his previous career by zealous proselytism in the county, and especially amongst his former parishioners. Ethel, at the same time, was to make the Dorcas Society at

Sturminster the basis of her operations, and thence attack the female population generally, hoping through them to secure a proportionate quota of the lords of creation.

"We mean to have every mother's son of you," said Father Palmer in one of his earliest colloquies with bucolic Clodshire. "You were good Catholics until comparatively recent days, and are far too respectable to be turned into Radicals and Dissenters now. At all events, if you do sin, it shall not be because you have not had the chance of doing better. You shall sin against light and knowledge; and woe betide you if you go wrong then."

This was a reversal of the ordinary policy; but it was consummately well calculated to catch Clodshire. This apparent showing of the hand struck Hodge as something so fair and above board, that half the battle was gained as soon as Father Palmer frankly confessed his strategy over a churchwarden-pipe and a

cup of cider. Gules never smoked a yard of clay, and declared that Clodshire cider gave him the colic.

Soon after his arrival he called at the *Gazette* office. Father Palmer was not quite hopeless of catching Claude, so he laid no embargo on Cyprian's association with him. In fact nothing nor nobody was tabooed. This was the *ars celare artem*. Gules looked immensely like a little tailor when out of his canonicals. It is a great mistake for parsons to wear a black tie, Oxford-mixed trousers, and visible shirt-front. Half the reverence is gone under such circumstances. It is especially a mistake to be thus negligent in point of costume when the cleric is small and of no reputation, and, of course, Cyprian got unmercifully roasted by Claude when he made his appearance.

"I really have no vacancy for a liner or local reporter, my good man," said the editor, pretending to be very busy with his copy. "Why, bless me, it's Cyprian

Gules! What means this metamorphosis, my very worthy brother-in-the-law? Are you doing penance for your sins?"

"Well yes, I am. You forget, Clande, that I am not in orders now."

"Oh, no, I forgot, you much-married man. Is Ethel to be sacrificed on the shrine of sacerdotalism?"

"No. I shall stick to *my* wife," replied Gules with emphasis.

"A hit; a very palpable hit, Gules. But really I thought you were coming to ask for a place as penny-a-liner, or to canvass for orders in the tailoring line. Won't they let you wear your old integuments?"

"I should not think of doing so. But I come on business; first to ask you to insert this advertisement soliciting tenders from the builders of Sturminster for erecting the Church of the Sacred Heart, and secondly, to request the pleasure of your meeting Father Palmer at our house as soon as you can. You will come?"

"What, you think you will convert me, and so carry the local press, eh?"

"I wish we dared expect anything half so satisfactory," answered Gules, who had his cue, and performed his task marvellously well.

"Yes, when the local 'rag' comes round, and the Duke of Brabazon with the county member and appurtenances are baptized into the Church—I mean your Church, you know—then things will be looking up."

"We don't despair."

"Of course you don't. When Gules succumbs—Gules who used to decry the papacy, and swear by the Orthodox Eastern Church—why should not a Broad Church editor and a latitudinarian layman or so confess the error of their ways?"

"It's the only thing to remedy our present evils, Claude," rejoined Gules with solemnity.

"So we all think, my good fellow. There's nothing like leather, our own peculiar leather and prunella, that is.

Why, look here—only don't be meanly withdrawing your advertisement when I tell you—just before you called I've had another interesting convert with me."

"Indeed!"

"You'd call him a pervert. Let's be charitable, and lump you all as 'verts. You remember McLachlan, the Bishop's son-in-law, and former examining chaplain?"

"Yes."

"He has become a Noncon. I fancy he thought John Babylon did not reward him as rapidly as he thought he ought for taking one of the multitudinous Misses Johnson off his hands; so he turned round, preached at the City Tabernacle, got inhibited by his papa-in-law, and was dipped the same day."

"And what did he want here?"

"Why, he fancied, as you must have done, I suppose, that this was the advertising department, or perhaps you expected to get your announcements in *gratis*

by bringing them to me. He too solicits tenders for the building of Little Bethel Chapel. The building trade will be looking up here, and Mr. Denton will be able to retire from office."

"A dissenting chapel in Sturminster!"

"It's dreadful, isn't it? Almost worse than a Married Monastery?"

"Or a School of the Sceptics?"

"Yes. What precious fools we all are, if we only knew it, Gules."

"Say rather what fools we have been. Claude, you must know as well as any man living, the risk there is in once slipping one's moorings from the Church."

"Yes," replied Claude, laying down his pen, for he had been mechanically correcting MS. so far, "that may be; but which Church? There are so many."

"You don't think so, Claude. I have often heard you say that only Rome and Free Thought had logical positions."

"And I say so still. But which logical position shall I assume? I never slipped

my moorings from the Church. I was not born a Catholic. It would be a very serious step to leave the Church ; but I was born to Free Thought, and only slipped my cable from one form of Free Thought to another."

"But nationally, if not individually, the creed of centuries was abjured for you."

"Not for me. It was abjured because in process of time, and according to the doctrine of development, the epoch had come for such abjuration. Now, it appears to me it would be an anachronism to go back. *You* are an anachronism, my boy, a living walking bit of bad chronology. It is like the grown man assuming the child's clothing."

"You are poking fun at my rig-out again," said the convert.

"No, I'm not. I had forgotten your lay attire for the moment. I admire the theory, and many of the practices of the Catholic Church immensely. I quite agree with Macaulay, that she has been a great power, and that we have much to thank her

for in the way of keeping alive knowledge in the Dark Ages."

"And the Faith."

"Yes, and the Faith, too. But I believe the machinery to be obsolete. The stage coach has been superseded by the railroad; less romantic, but infinitely more useful. I would by no means abolish the stage coach, I like to see the four spanking horses and the yellow vehicle go along the western road in town, and think how far preferable such a method of transit is to the filthy tunnels of the Underground. But the very echoes of the guard's horn seem out of date. So does your Angelus, ringing out above the sounds of the great city, seem to speak of a past age, and an antique faith."

"But the gates of hell were never to prevail——"

"Against the Faith—not against any particular manifestation of it. These may drop off, and yet the faith live; in fact, the dropping off may be the very sign of vitality. But we won't argue. I should

be thoroughly sorry to convince you that the step you have taken is wrong, because for some temperaments I think such a regimen as that of Rome is necessary."

"And yours is just such an one, Vallance."

"I doubt it; though I am by no means sure about it. When such men as John Henry Newman and Henry Edward Manning elect to swamp reason and develop faith purely, he would be a very conceited prig indeed who would say that such a process was beneath his dignity or his serious consideration."

"Let us hope to see you do a little swamping on your own account, Claude. Meanwhile you will come and see Father Palmer, won't you?"

"Certainly, this very evening if you like."

"He is the very man to suit you, and smokes like a volcano."

"I'm glad to hear it. There's no knowing what you might have done, Gules, if you could only have managed a

sociable pipe. It's a marvellous bond of brotherhood, that tube of fragile clay."

The meeting duly came off, and was a very agreeable one. Father Palmer, however, as is sometimes the case with zealous proselytizers, reckoned rather without his host, and mistook Claude's liberality and *bonhomie* for conviction. He was accordingly a little disappointed and disposed to think him time-serving when Claude did not strike his colours. It is probably impossible for one who has been born and educated in the Roman faith, or indeed in any form of faith which seeks to reproduce the rigidity of the Roman, to understand the position of the consistent Broad Churchman. He is ready, like the philosopher of old, to include all creeds in his populous Pantheon and even to erect an altar to the Unknown and Unknowable. When he reads such works as Mill's Essay on Theism, or the Catechism of Auguste Comte, or again the Belfast Address of Professor Tyndall, a sentence from which

stands as the motto on our title-page, he does not draw any hard and fast line which shall exclude advanced thinkers from the larger Church of England because they cannot accept the Shibboleths imposed by the smaller pay; such a movement as the Old Catholic one bids him beware lest he proscribe Dogmatism itself as unphilosophical, since that form of the faith seems designed to teach him, that it is possible to subordinate without altogether swamping reason, and that there is a very real, if not as yet accurately defined line between faith and credulity.

In due course of time the church of the Sacred Heart and Little Bethel Baptist Chapel were opened. Father Palmer officiated in gorgeous vestments at the former, assisted by Gules in apparel only one degree less resplendent. A tolerably numerous body of converts had been gathered together during the Church-in-the-Catacombs period, when mass was said in a first-floor room of a private house; and after the church of the

Sacred Heart was opened it was no unusual thing to see a timid Dorcas Society lady peep timidly in, just to see what it was like. They were so courteously received, and found everything as they expressed it, so "nice," that some of them remained permanently. There had been a very small nucleus of Catholics scattered at wide intervals around; and Gules's influence as a parish priest among the poor had been, as we have seen, considerable, so that the ancient faith made considerable way at first, and Sturminster was looked upon as a very successful mission. Ethel was delighted with this success, and vowed she would not rest till she had converted the whole female population down to Tabitha Tart. She got the old lady to go into the church one day when there were none of "those dreadful masses" going on. It was quite towards evening when Ethel and she entered, but the venerable spinster was not at all sure that there was not a priest in ambush somewhere, ready to celebrate what she

termed the Mystery of Iniquity before her eyes. She escaped, however, except in so far as the odour of the incense, which still hung about the building, offended her olfactory nerves. She sniffed like a veritable Miss Evans and conveyed her opinion in the accustomed formula.

“My dear, it’s disgusting.”

The Reverend Mr. McLachlan opened fire at Little Bethel with a tremendous broadside against Rome. McLachlan’s theology had always been of the negative kind. It was not so much that he was right, as that everybody else was wrong. His idea of conversion was simply making a man believe that he and nine-tenths of his fellow creatures were on the high road to destruction, and then leaving them to flounder into salvation as best they might. It was rumoured that he joined the Baptists in preference to any other sect mostly from the pleasure he felt in giving converts a good uncomfortable dip, keeping them under water until they were as nearly

as possible asphyxiated, and so "taking the nonsense out of them." This was what he called Practical Christianity. It was within an ace of being very practical indeed in the case of one or two aged and weakly converts, out of whom he not only took the nonsense, but very nearly the life. The children who saw him officiate on such occasions, fled when they met McLachlan in the streets, identifying his office in some occult manner with that of the bathing-women who immersed them so cruelly when they were at the sea-side.

The edifying subjects treated of by Mr. McLachlan on his opening day were, in the morning, "The Pope the Man of Sin," and, in the evening, "Rags of Popery." The latter discourse reviewed with regret his own experiences in the Establishment, and even alluded disrespectfully to his right reverend papa-in-law's lawn sleeves, and the high and dry condition of the theology at the parish church.

There was a fair gathering at this shrine

too, and Mr. Denton's congregations suffered in consequence. He was, if possible, a shade drier than usual on the occasion, and Mrs. Tuft Hunter gave it as her opinion to Claude as they came out of church, that the Brabazons would become Catholic again on very slight provocation.

"We don't expect talent in Clodshire, Mr. Vallance, of course," she said, adding with a very languishing look indeed, "but when we have talent we don't care to see it only bestowed on the *Clodshire Gazette* instead of being employed in the pulpit as well. Why in the world don't you revive the Brabazon Lodge Chapel?"

"Sturminster is becoming like Alexandria of old already in the multitude of its religious sects. Would you have me add another?"

"Why not?"

"And let us be just, whatever we are. Mr. Denton, speaking I believe for the Bishop, wants me to take Combe Dean."

"Then do it. Oh, they have discovered

you are not so black as you are painted, have they?"

"Like another much maligned personage, yes. I shall probably come up to Brabazon Lodge in a day or two and discuss this proposal of the Bishop. I think it may be worth while to think of it on political grounds."

"Really, the only way it is possible to regard any question connected with our dear but most unspiritual establishment. Good-by;" and off she drove.

Amid the congregation who listened to Mr. McLachlan morning and evening was a certain historic cobbler, who forthwith gave it out as his opinion that the rags of popery were still hanging about that "gemmun." "In fact, they didn't want gentlefolks to talk to them from the pulpit. What did gentlefolks know about the wants of the working people? What Sturminster required was a good sound gospel ministry, carried out by a man who had rose from the ranks his-self." Everybody knew what that

meant of course, and were not therefore surprised that the cobbler himself received a "call" soon after, and came out as a good, plain, ranting, Methody in a carpenter's shop. Plain speaking was the order of the day among the religious leaders at this Clodshire village, and this was the title our cobbler elected to be known by—a good plain ranting Methody, as preached the gospel. The philosopher of old said that many roads led to heaven. Sturminster, long confined to one route, had now, at all events, a choice of transits.

Nor did this exuberance of spiritual life expend itself even when each of the recognised sects of Protestant Nonconformists was properly represented in bricks and mortar and a local ministry. When the Wesleyans proper came to colonize the place, the cobbler found his occupation gone, and after denouncing the new comers as gentlefolks in disguise, took to the Shaking line of business himself, identifying that with his ideal of good plain ranting

Methodism. The Plymouth Brethren were represented in all their numerous branches ; and then the Catholic Apostolic Church sent down a spare angel to commence operations, and an inspirational speaker from the Spiritualists turned at once the heads and the tables of a considerable minority. Even a highly respectable commercial gentleman who sold a new manure on commission, and who spent a day or two, combining business with pleasure, at Shire Hall, was looked upon by the now critical religionists of Sturminster as a Mormonite Elder come to negotiate the exportation of Squire Atkins's household to the City of the Saints in Utah.

Mr. Denton resigned himself to his fate. Things had got beyond him ; and the worst of all was that his foes were of his own household. The wife of his bosom turned against him as Job's did, and declared that Mr. McLachlan's came nearer her idea of a gospel ministry than that of her reverend husband did. She had seen the discourses

duly reported in that godless *Gazette*, which put them side by side with Father Palmer's abominations, and she openly stated her intention of sitting under that dear good man—meaning still Mr. McLachlan—her lord and master's prohibition notwithstanding. She was ready with a text on all occasions; and the one she brought to the front now was to the effect that we ought to obey God rather than man. It was not made quite clear when, where, or how she received the divine command to attend the ministrations of Mr. McLachlan. Persistent quoters of texts often leave a margin of uncertainty in this way; but it makes no matter to them, and certainly made none to Mrs. Denton, who sat under the beloved Baptist to the great scandal of the parish and the triumph of an awakened pew-opener. She said, as she buttoned the rector's wife into the little deal box in the dissenting chapel, "When once the grace of God gets into the 'art, hout goes pride."

Claude smiled characteristically at this

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unlooked-for fertility of ecclesiastical life and energy. He did not smile in sarcasm, because he too had known what it was to drift—as he still termed it—out of the prescribed tracks. There was a grotesque element in many of these different manifestations, no doubt; but he dared not call them common or unclean. He could not doubt but that it was the Spirit blowing where it listed and as it was best for those to whom its operations were addressed. Whatever his own ultimate destination might be, he could not but feel thankful to that creed which had taught him to be tolerant to others. He might choose, perhaps, to swamp reason, as he termed it, and throw himself into the all-embracing arms of the old Church; or he might fall back on the theory that hereditary faith was sacred, and so live and die a priest of the Anglican Church. Or yet again, he might stand aloof, as he was now doing, and let others fight out the battle which seemed so wearily protracted, yet so indecisive. But what-

ever he did, he would not dogmatize; no, not though he received his inspiration from the very fount of dogma itself. Such was the gist of a conversation he had with poor old Mr. Denton, who came to him for the fiftieth time in his trouble, after his wife had deserted his ministrations, and when the congregation had dwindled down to the Brabazon Lodge people, Squire Atkins and his numerous appendages, the charity children, and the church officials.

"It isn't a cheering prospect I own, Vallance, but I do wish you would come back to us."

"Broad Church is about the only cultus not embodied in our Clodshire Alexandria, I grant you," he replied. "But I am, as you say, diffident of my powers. These new lights eclipse our poor farthing candles, do they not?"

"Farthing candle! I am not worthy to be called a rushlight, when my own wife deserts me."

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and prophets seldom have honour in their own country."

Why did he pause when he said this, as though some sudden but strong impression had crossed his mind? Did he remember how *his* wife had made him a hero, made him a "demigod"—how no familiarity had ever bred contempt in that fond faithful heart?

Did he go on to think how the one wish that lay nearest to that heart, which had now ceased to beat in the flesh, was that he should still minister in the little church where their love-vows had been plighted? Could it be that Ada was present in spirit by his side, and turned his thoughts into a current the very reverse of that in which they had previously been running, and which his words seemed to indicate? Above all, could that simple-minded old man, who had come to bewail his own hard lot, see down below the surface, and know what was going on? Could he, perhaps, whose eyes were growing dim for the things of sense, see beyond the limits of ordinary

sense, see it may be the beloved presence by his side, that was swaying his impressionable heart? How was it else that he so timed his question, and seemed to ask it so softly and persuasively?

"Vallance, will you preach for me next Sunday?"

Very likely it was put into his mouth by John Babylon, or the Bishop of Glastonbury. Perhaps the old man wanted to fill his pews again. Brabazon Lodge had perhaps threatened to secede, unless Claude were "laid on" anew. All these possibilities were present to his mind; but besides these came the pleading voice, the forgotten glance of Ada prompting him to say yes. The old captain was by; and while Claude hesitated, he looked up and saw the old man eyeing him wistfully, as much as to say, "how will he answer?"

"Father," said Claude. "You shall answer the question for me. What shall I say to Mr. Denton? Shall I preach at Combe Dean next Sunday?"

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"I think Ada would like it," was all the old man said; but the argument was the most persuasive that lips could have framed.

"You will do it for me, Vallance?"

"He has answered for me, sir. I will do it—for Ada."

The *locum tenens* at Combe Dean had a holiday on the following Sunday, and Claude Vallance gathered a good many from the various motley congregations of Sturminster to hear him speak once more in the little hamlet church.

"I believe if you would only take your place with me on terms of perfect equality, and work Sturminster and Combe Dean alternately until the benefice is cut off, we could still get some of those wandering sheep back."

But still all the answer which could be extracted from Claude was that he would think of it.

Did he still, as of old, mean that he would consult Ada?



CHAPTER IX.

REVENANTS.

SO sublime was Claude Vallance's feeling of satisfaction when, in deference to the changing wishes of his ecclesiastical superiors, he again recommenced clerical duty amongst his old parishioners, that he seemed to know it was something more than subjective, and still felt sure it could emanate from none other than that which during the whole of his recent life had been to him the sole source of peace. A very atmosphere of repose rested upon the quiet place and all his relations with it. Now, when his household gods appeared to be on the point of rising from their ashes, the spirits of peace and contentment took their place by his solitary

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hearth as if to welcome those who would make it home again. He had promised Ada that he would, if the occasion offered, resume his duties in the dear familiar church; and it was especially when he was ministering there that such a feeling of satisfaction came upon him as he had never before experienced. Perhaps as we grow older, and especially in proportion as our ends and aims acquire concentration upon one unselfish object, we become accessible in a greater degree to those more refined feelings which scarcely affect us in our thoughtless hours, and which some assure us to be the sweeping of unseen fingers upon the sensitive chords of our being. If that be true, it were reasonable to suppose that such impressions would reach us more frequently in proportion as we become conscious

"How grows in Paradise our store."

Soon after he began his new work, the Festival of All Saints occurred; and it was always a favourite subject with Claude to

inquire into the present condition of the departed. Never had that topic such pertinence for him as now; and his hearers could feel he was speaking from the heart when he gave it as his opinion that probably the next stage of existence was far less different from the present than we generally allowed ourselves to suppose.

"Why," he asked, "should we attribute to our beloved ones such a change in character, such a difference of pursuits as, if rightly assigned to them, would go far to destroy identity? Is it not much more likely that they are still as they were when we knew them; their affection for us unchanged, their mode of showing that affection only raised one degree higher than it was here? How little the world around knew of our deepest moments of rapture when they were with us! How their very sweetness lay in their secrecy! Such communion was too sacred for the eyes of the common herd to look upon; nay, we even veiled it, with a beautiful reserve, from those

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whom we esteemed and loved in their degree. Does nothing like this enter into that true beatitude 'Blessed are they that mourn?' Are not you, whose hearts God has touched by taking away some very dear one, conscious of such rare and mystic moments as this, when the world drops off from you, and you—may I not say *we*?—are alone with our beloved dead?"

"And yet did I dare to say 'dead?' Is not the word almost a libel on that Higher Life into which they have entered? They are not dead, not even sleeping. How often I seem to have repeated that fact;—but do we any of us, you or I, lay it to heart? And is it not the one assurance that we want, in the world's sere wintertide, like that amid which the Church places with such consummate tact this great Festival of All Saints?"

There was not one of those who listened to him but knew the current of his own thoughts, and seemed to see, just as he felt, by his side the pale-faced girl who had faded

so strangely from their midst. They had made their remarks of old as became village gossips; but now they knew the truth, or, if they had not, the grand charity of death would have blotted out all suspicion. The resurrection-change seems well nigh to have passed upon us in the loftier nature wherewith even memory dowers us, as soon as we have passed from the circle of those who, whilst we were with them, were but too ready to censure and condemn us.

But there was another promise which Claude had made to Ada besides the one concerning his resumption of clerical duty; and for the fulfilment of this latter Sturminster in general, and Captain Parkinson in particular, waited with some impatience. The Bath-chairman who had taken Ada for the last time to the old trysting-place, and had heard something at least of the compact, duly informed Combe Dean and its surroundings that the little dying girl at Dale House was just an angel before her time, and had with almost her last breath

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"squared everything between the parson and his wife," making him promise to take her back again, though she had behaved so cruelly in preventing the marriage that ought to have taken place with herself. The village-gossips, therefore, who might be supposed to fulfil the duties of the chorus in the old Greek tragedy, realized the romance of the "situation;" but now the little "angel" had gone, they thought the least Claude could do would be to carry out her wishes. Besides, there was a good deal of sympathy with Pomona House, too, and the fine lady who had risked all for love. Clearly there was, in the opinion of all, only one course open to Claude Vallance; but he seemed by no means in a hurry to adopt that. Claude and Clara were not persons to do things—or at all events, to do this thing—in a hurry.

As for Captain Parkinson, he could bear it no longer. Ada's voice seemed to reproach him for taking no part in bringing about the fulfilment of the promise; and he was

every day more conscious that his time was likely to be short, so that, if he were to have anything to do with the matter at all, he must do it quickly. With that transparent betrayal of his plan which simple-minded old people often mistake for the utmost acuteness on their own part, he said to Claude one day—

“I am projecting a visit to London, Claude. I feel a little hipped and dull, and I think a change would do me good.”

“At your time of life, Captain,” answered Claude, with the most perfect gravity, “such changes are indeed requisite. Go, by all means; and may your change prove beneficial.”

Had he said instead, “Claude, I have been spending the morning with Mrs. Villars, at Pomona House, and we have decided that the best plan is for me to go and fetch your wife from London to Sturminster,” he could not have posted him up more precisely in his intended movements.

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"I shall be back to-morrow, or, at the latest, next day," added the old man.

"Your stay will be brief, though I doubt not, delightful. London air does work miracles sometimes, I know."

"I expect it will in this case."

"I have no doubt of it."

In due course, and having apprised Mrs. Vallance beforehand of his intentions, Captain Parkinson presented himself at the shabby East-end lodgings, and said, "Mrs. Vallance, I have come, at Mrs. Villars's request, to take you *home*."

How long it was since that word had borne any relevancy for Clara! It had been, for a space which seemed half a lifetime, synonymous with the dingy parlours where she spent her lonely days and nights. But what did it mean now?

"Home?"

"Yes. To Pomona House."

"And my husband?"

"Is still with me; but ready and waiting to welcome you."

"Does he say so? And, *if* so, why does he not come? Why has he not written?"

"You know the circumstances under which the—pardon me—the reconciliation has been brought about?"

"Dear sir, I do," replied Clara, with much warmth of feeling, and taking him by the hand. "Your daughter——"

"My darling one made it her dying request. Under such circumstances may we not hope to bury the past?"

Clara felt that the past *was* buried, more literally than he meant.

"Yes—but my husband?"

Still harping on her husband. She could not feel that all was well whilst he seemed to stand aloof; and she told the old man so.

"He does not, dear lady, I assure you. He is so proud—you are so proud—that it is exceedingly difficult for an outsider to mediate in this matter without seeming to interfere."

"You will scarcely speak of yourself as an outsider, Captain Parkinson."

"I shall not be, even as far as you are concerned, much longer. But still I find it easier to speak to you than to Claude."

"Do you? I am glad of that." It had grown more rare than ever for any one to attribute to her any of the womanly elements in human nature.

"Yes; and yet I know it is not unwillingness that makes Claude Vallance seem to hesitate. It is nothing more than a foolish reserve, if even that. Be you the first to break through it. I would not ask you if I were not quite sure I was right. I would not ask you to patch up a hollow peace."

"His promise—if nothing else—would obviate that."

"Yes, his promise is sacred; but there is more than that."

"Do you believe it?"

"I am sure of it. And now tell me, do you forgive my poor lost child any real or imagined offence against you?"

"I forgive and forget all. Nay, I am

conscious it is I who have to ask forgiveness—not of her, but of you both.”

“She hath outsoared the shadow of our night,” was the poor old father’s beautiful quotation from Shelley’s plaintive *Adonais*. “Come with me to Sturminster,” he continued. “Come back to your old home. You can await him there. He shall still make the first advance.”

“Will he, think you?”

“I do not think; I am sure. You would rather he saw you there than here, would you not?”

“Far.”

“There, where first you were acquainted, and by your dear mother’s side, let your love-vows—your life-vows—be renewed.”

“It shall be so.”

Under such circumstances did Clara Valance revisit her childhood’s home. Inexpressibly touching as such a renewal of associations always must be, there were features in her history which made it exceptionally so. Since she left her father’s

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house, triumphing in the success of her schemes, and in the possession of the man she loved, she had not crossed that happy threshold; and, since then, he who had shared her triumph and congratulated her on her success, had gone from it by death. He had cherished the brightest dreams from her marriage, and had lived to see them fade away even when they seemed fulfilled. Would he be able to witness their consummation yet, supposing it to be in store? Her cheerless creed told her no; but an instinctive hope that such would be the case lay deeper down in her heart. Yes, she felt sure that her mother's simple prophecy was coming true yet, and that she had done better when she married Claude, than when she went off the first time a young and blushing bride in the feeble arms of the country apothecary.

"How full of memories is each field and street in this familiar place," she said, rather to herself than to her travelling companion. "There is a Dorcas out scandal-

mongering, and old Mr. Denton is pacing the market-place with his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, just as though he had never left off since I came away."

"And yet it is years ago."

"It seems ages. Time is measured by emotions better than by days, weeks, months. The very permanence and conservative character of these old stagnant places serve to remind us by contrast how much we have changed ourselves."

Clara's meeting with her mother was very quiet and undemonstrative. She might have been away only for a week or two on a visit. There were so many topics on which it was dangerous to touch, that they spoke little and cautiously; but by-and-by they grew bolder, discussed all the petty news of the place, and at last the one subject of all came to the surface.

"And Claude, mamma?"

"Dear Claude will be here directly. I thought you would like to see him alone first. Was I not right?"

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"Quite. I have so much to thank you all for."

"We arranged that when the Captain returned Claude should leave Dale House and come here."

"To stay?"

"To stay, of course. God grant a happy future be in store for us all, Clara."

"I can say 'Amen' to that, as you know, from the bottom of my heart."

"If your dear father had only lived to see this, how happy it would have made him!"

"Poor papa!"

"But hark! there is the dog-cart; and that is Claude's step outside. He will come in without summoning the servants to the door. I shall go and leave you awhile. God bless you both."

In another moment the door opened and Claude entered. No word was spoken; but he gently closed the door behind him, extended his arms, and Clara threw herself into them.

She was the first to speak.

"Thank God, we are once more together, Claude."

"Together till death, Clara," he replied; and she wondered whether his words were meant to bear any strange emphasis. She looked at his hand as it circled her form, and there on his fourth finger she saw the signet ring with the motto "*Ad mortem fidelis.*" That ring he had drawn from Ada's finger before the death-change passed upon her.

But there was this consolation in Clara's cheerless creed—at least so she persuaded herself at present—that could she but secure his love in this life, she would "jump the life to come." She was scarcely sure that she believed it then; but it suited her present purpose to persuade herself that she did so. The present was so precious to her that she would not dash its enjoyment with what might be but an imaginary grievance. Yet, in spite of herself, the question would haunt her, "Why does he say so emphati-

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cally 'Till death?' He believes in love surviving death."

Claude Vallance was considerably altered. He had, as if to typify the *laissez aller* condition of recent existence, grown a ferocious beard, and time or care—perhaps both—had grizzled it severely. Clara did not look an hour older than when he first saw her in that very house. Her features were more chastened and intellectual than of old, but there was not a line on that perfect face, and the hands were plump and white as ever. Again, as Claude sat beside her on the couch in lover-like fashion, while the evening shadows fell, he was conscious of that overwhelming sense of satisfaction which came across him when officiating in Combe Dean church. Was it that the dear one came back and thus impressionally approved the fulfilment of his word to her; or was it simply Nature endorsing the maxim that it is not good for man to be alone? He was as little inclined to speculate as his wife herself; and when the evening lamps

were lighted, and Mrs. Villars joined them, he felt as acutely as Clara how much is comprised in that simple English word "Home."

"To-night I preside and treat you as visitors," said the old lady. "To-morrow I withdraw to your old quarters upstairs, Claude, and leave you master and mistress of Pomona House. I am an old woman, and wish to retire into private life." This last remark was made very firmly—for even Mrs. Villars could be firm on occasions—and in reply to a look of deprecation from the pair.

"I declare," she added, "you seem just like a newly-married couple, and make one feel quite awkward."

"And yet we do not arrogate the detestable privilege of billing and cooing in public, which such persons seem to think incumbent upon them," said Claude.

"Just," added Clara, "as rustic swains feel it necessary to walk in the thoroughfares with their arm round their *fiancée*."

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"No, you are not quite so bad as that, I own."

Twenty times before they retired did Claude miss the honest old brewer. He could not face the smoking-room by himself, for he knew that there his father-in-law's absence would be most palpable. Of all those interested, Claude alone knew the terrible history of that death: and he could not shake off from himself the feeling that another besides Ada was joying over his return to Pomona House.

At church on Sunday was perhaps the most trying ordeal. Claude was to preach at Sturminster, and wondered whether Clara would accompany him. Not a word was said on either side; but he was deeply pleased to find that she dressed and set out to church with him as a matter of course.

"Then you have got over the bugbear of clericalism now, Clara?"

"Nothing but death shall separate betwixt thee and me, Claude."

"And your own creed?"

"Is in somewhat of a transition state, I think; but we won't discuss that until it is a little more settled, please. I thought by starting so early we should avoid the people, but all Sturminster seems turned out to see us."

"They don't look at such a fine couple every day, you know."

Sturminster was satisfied at last: and Combe Dean only disposed to resent Claude's taking his wife to any but his own old church on the first occasion after their reunion. He preached there in the evening, however, and took Clara and Mrs. Villars home with the Captain to Dale House afterwards.

"Here I keep state with the bats and the owls, good people. You are welcome to this abode of desolation. It would be very lonely were it not for the outlook yonder." He pointed through the window to the village churchyard, where the slanting sunbeams lit up a certain marble headstone with unwonted brilliancy.

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"We must soon be thinking of our *Nunc Dimittis* now, Mrs. Villars, having brought these exceedingly troublesome people together once more."

"Indeed, Captain Parkinson, I shall do nothing of the kind."

"Mrs. Villars is inclined to continue the *Jubilate* a while longer," interposed Claude.

Clara laughed, but not sardonically as of old, saying—

"At your former habit, quoting texts, Claude!"

The old Captain was as good as his word, and did chant his *Nunc Dimittis* very shortly after. He ailed nothing apparently; but there was an appearance of finality about his words and acts which, after the event, made it very evident to those who had associated with him, that he had long anticipated his own death.

"I really can't stand these bats and owls and the abomination of desolation in general. I want more society, and must go, as the old Latin comedy-writer so

beautifully puts it, 'ad plures'—to the majority."

He diligently paid visits to all his friends, making up little differences where any existed, and altogether rendering it evident that his wish was to be at peace with all men.

One Sunday evening he had been to Combe Dean church as usual, where Claude now officiated regularly, and generally passed the evening after service at Dale House. Both he and Clara noticed on this particular night that the old man seemed drowsy, and they joked him as to his not finding their company very entertaining. He could not disguise his sleepiness, and quoted Shakspeare thereanent to the extent of saying, an "exposition of sleep" had come over him. They were the last words Claude and Clara remembered. In the morning he lay later than usual, and the servant, on entering his bedroom, found that he had passed peacefully into that sleep which has no earthly waking. His

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countenance was perfectly calm and tranquil, bearing no traces of that death-agony which some tell us must be experienced by all. Such an end as his is the very luxury of death. If one may judge of the divine purposes, it would seem that thus the spirit was designed to quit its earthly tenement, and that only to some disorganization of the nature are due the travail-pains of birth, or so-called death.

Ere another Sunday came round, the Captain was laid by the Rector in the quiet sleeping-place of God's Acre, beneath the shadow of the cross. The good old parson (he liked to be called so) took quite an aggrieved tone to Claude, saying—

“He said he should go to rest before me; but I did not think he would have done it, I did not indeed.”

For the time being, the bats and the owls, and the abomination of desolation had Dale House all to themselves.

The *Clodshire Gazette* seemed to take a new lease of life, now husband and wife

worked at it with a will again. It had settled down into a good provincial organ, and was beloved at Brabazon Lodge and Glastonbury Palace far more than in the days when it owned its expensive private wire, and London office; but Bishop and Duke each felt conscious of improvement when Clara's pen contributed once more to its columns.

"Whether it is that the man works better now his mind is at rest, or what is the cause, I know not," wrote the Bishop of Glastonbury to John Babylon, "but the *Gazette*—to my radical way of thinking—is an eminently respectable county paper now. P.S. There need be no more delay in cutting off Combe Dean."

A letter with a ducal coronet, which reached Glastonbury Palace soon afterwards, suggested that, if nothing better offered in the way of preferment for Mr. Vallance, the Duke of Brabazon would be glad to have the chapel consecrated, as had once been proposed, and Sir Charles Wentworth and

himself would endow it with a sufficient income, provided they could retain the patronage.

While the crisis—clerically speaking—was delayed, Clara took an opportunity of making her confession.

“Padre,” she said suddenly, when they were sitting one evening amid the firelight, “I am ready to talk about my creed now. The East-end Lyceum has left me, and I no longer appertain to the School of the Sceptics.”

“Except in so far as Sceptic means Investigator.”

“Except in so far as either the one or the other title belongs to you, Claude. I have been listening to your sermons carefully of late.”

“I am flattered. It is evidently exceptional on your part, from the fact of your feeling it necessary to mention it.”

“And I am conscious that your faith is mine.”

"And yet my faith and practice ran riot too."

"Faith in its human phases has to sow its youthful wild oats like any other constituent of our queerly compounded nature."

"It would seem so ; and we each sowed a goodly crop broadcast ; yet we can scarcely regret the result. For myself I feel every doubt has been carried at the bayonet's point ; do not you, Clara ?"

"No. Shall I say something romantic?"

"By all means."

"Mine have fallen pierced by the golden arrow of love, dear Claude. When I assumed a masculine tone in my speech and my writings, I felt it necessary to extend that tone even to matters of belief. It was an affectation, as truly as that which in simpering misses breaks out with mincing speech, gushing letters, and cross-bedizened prayer books."

"A sort of spiritual strong-mindedness."

"Exactly. It is gone."

"Her falser self slipt from her like a robe,
And left her woman!"

mused Claude.

"I am glad that quotation came to your mind, dear Claude," Clara said; "because it so exactly expresses what I would convey to you."

"I thoroughly sympathize with your position, past and present, Clara. I too thought that, to render my theology masculine, I must well-nigh eliminate the supernatural from it. That I found I could not do. Then I shot off into sacramentalism, and felt that the Anglican Church was erring on the side of defect. I set it down that all organization must fetter the spirit. My own body, as the tenement of the indwelling soul, should have taught me better; but it did not. Now I think we have each, perhaps by different but equally devious routes, reached the happy mean at last."

"Through troublesome waters sped to the

haven where we would be. At all events our own doubts and wanderings must make us tolerant towards others."

"And Sturminster affords a magnificent field for the exercise of that particular virtue. It is a very Babel of theological tongues. Yes," he continued, "I feel that to be the key of our position. We are not Protestant, for we protest against no man. We hold our opinions on the tenure of individual conviction like the rest, though tradition comes in to confirm the conclusions at which we arrive. We are, in fact—as poor Gules would have said in his happier days—Catholics in the truest sense of the term, for the grounds of our belief are those upon which all, from Romanists down to Banters, whether tacitly or avowedly, rest."

"Yes, I believe that in the Anglican communion we have, as you said, the most perfect attainable fusion of Faith and Reason."

"As far as we can see at present. The practical method in which we have worked

out our conclusion, puts me in mind of the old Scotchman's sententious maxim as to honesty."

"What was that?"

"Honesty's the best policy, my friends," said this canny Scot. "I ought to ken weel; for I've *tried baith*."

"Good. We have 'tried baith,' with a vengeance in our experimental theology."

There was another revival resulting in the return of two more of the family circle to Sturminster. The Stomachic Ale had been in abeyance for some time after the crash; but the interest was retained, and fortunately so, for Miles Denton and Emily worked hard and economized rigidly, the result being that they were able to leave the Borough Office and the Brixton Villa, and revive the brewery at Sturminster. From that time forth, the fortune of Miles was in the ascendant, and Emily found time, even with the cares of a rapidly increasing family, to contribute a weekly "spasm" to the Poets' Corner of the *Clodshire Gazette*.

But there was yet another revenant. Flower Jones, *née* Fielding, looked in at Pomona House one morning in widow's weeds. The voyage had tried Oliver, and no sooner did he set foot on the distant land of his election than he succumbed to the now historic attack of measles.

"You ought to bear your bereavement with Christian resignation, Flower," said Clara, in a very enigmatical tone.

"I do, ma'am," she answered; "but I must say Mr. Jones was very kind to me as soon as he got over his sea-sickness. He suffered very much."

"Poor dear man. Let us hope he is better off."

Thus did life at Sturminster seem to be quietly and naturally getting back to the old grooves again. There were gaps in the circle, true; but death, which made them, caused kindlier memories to take the place of old misconceptions. Everywhere it seemed that recollections of Ada went on their angel-missions of peace and goodwill,

until Miss Tabitha Tart's occupation was pretty well gone, and she gave it out that she should soon leave Sturminster, which had grown to be "the most dead-alive place on earth."





CHAPTER X.

A TWO-EDGED SWORD.

IN that disposal of our personages which is now imminent, it would be wrong, of course, to include two Bishops in the same category as the common herd. Despite the differences of their theological opinions, there had been, up to this time, a remarkable unity of action between the prelates John Babylon and Augustus Glastonbury. The Bishop of Babylon, before his promotion to the metropolitan see, had trembled at the possibility of Broad Church principles making their appearance in his rustic diocese. In the great City such presence was inevitable. It was one of the many phases of the Establishment he knew he must be prepared to meet, and

which it would be idle to try to stamp out, though he might manage to keep it down beneath the heel of his episcopal boot. But Broad Church principles in a brother Bishop were very different from the same opinions among the inferior clergy. In the atmosphere of the Upper House, and the society of spiritual peers, those tendencies might be possibly innocuous, which, a stratum lower down in the ecclesiastical formation, would be revolutionary and fraught with peril to Church and State.

So did John Babylon argue, while he smiled with dignified tolerance at the advanced ideas of his brother of Glastonbury.

"An accomplished scholar and a well read theologian is the Bishop of Glastonbury," he would observe to Twister *in camera*, or to the inner circle of the five o'clock tea; "but inclined to be flighty, and scarcely aware of what is due to his position."

He spoke compassionately of him as though he had been a simple suffragan or

colonial, or at best, the Bishop of Sodor and Man. He was a young man—prelatically juvenile, if not so in actual years—who had not yet imbibed to the full the *quieta non movere* principle of episcopal veterans.

In order to secure and retain the Brabazon interest, especially after the influence of Sir Charles Wentworth became paramount in that ducal household, the Lord Bishop of Babylon had been obliged to swallow several very bitter pills both at Glastonbury and in Babylon. His bugbear was Broad Churchmanship; and it was quite certain that any coquetry he might have displayed with those principles when embodied in Claude Vallance was due to some far-sighted strategy in the episcopal tactics. When Conservative principles prevailed at Court, and before the serpent of Liberalism had crept into the paradise of Brabazon Lodge, he could afford to snub a curate or so to his heart's content; but when the tide turned, and especially when

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that curate developed first into an editor and then into the proprietor of a first-class Liberal provincial paper, he was obliged, however his gorge might rise, to trim. Claude Vallance's ecclesiastical escapades in London and Sturminster strengthened his hands, but still that eccentric curate seemed to have as many lives, and consequently to die as hard, as the proverbial cat. Eventually the screw had been applied to him so very dexterously that John Babylon was forced to concede his point in respect of the individual by furthering Claude's promotion ; but he made up his mind to take it out on the school to which that contumacious cleric belonged. The mode of warfare he adopted was very characteristic, and perhaps scarcely bore out the somewhat undignified remark which his younger brother of Glastonbury was wont to make in private to his wife, and which may well be quoted as a pendent to John Babylon's comments on himself. Whenever the name was mentioned in matrimonial discussions the

Bishop of Glastonbury discussed it contemptuously with some such remark as—

“John Babylon is an old woman, who owes his position simply to his possessing the requisite amount of incapacity and servility. That was the way the ministry of his time made their appointments. Greek play-editing had gone out of fashion, and truckling imbecility was the sole qualification.”

“How fortunate for you, my dear, that a more discriminating government came in, or your transcendent merits might never have been recognised,” said Mrs. Bishop, who was a wag in her small way.

The worst of it, as far as John Babylon was concerned, was that Broad Churchmanship was immensely popular. It was perhaps the natural reaction from the rise of the Tractarian and Ritualistic schools; but it was as much in favour with the masculine intellect as those with the feminine. *Æsthetic* Broad Churchmanship, such as that affected by Claude Vallance, attracted many

who were deterred by the cold, hard, theological tone of the advanced intellectual systems of the day, and at the same time unable to accept the ecclesiasticism of the more ornate cultus. Somebody proposed to start a new system under Vallance as heresiarch, and christen it "Fast" Church. But, whatever it might be called, the thing was popular, and John Babylon saw that it would never do to fight the movement openly. A masked battery was his resource, and its elaboration exactly suited his turn of mind.

In combination with the Primate of the day (and, for the nonce, we elect to be independent of all chronology) he framed a measure which was ostensibly directed against Tractarianism, and in its preamble set forth that its object was to put down Puseyites, but the real drift of which was to revive the somnolent era of the Church of England. It was an instrument for reintroducing ecclesiastical Quietism. Just as in former days sham Toleration Acts were

framed avowedly in the interests of Protestant Nonconformity, but really for the sake of comprehending Roman Catholics, so this cherubic sword guarding the portals of the Establishment was designed to turn both ways, and while seeming only to cut down Puseyites, was to demolish Broad Churchmen as if by accident. The plan was clever if not quite original. The only marvel was that it passed muster, and was chaperoned even by Liberal journals on the strength of its *ad captandum* preamble. The most amusing episode of its inception—indeed the only one that concerns our narrative—was the historic quarrel which it produced between the two prelates whose names have graced the pages of our brief history.

Under pretence of change of air, and for the sake of catching the Glastonbury breezes which, he averred, had always suited his episcopal constitution, the Bishop of Babylon gave a broad hint to his brother of Glastonbury that he would willingly spend a week of the recess with him in the course of a round

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of Clodshire visits. This was at a time when the division of Sturminster parish was under discussion; and John Babylon thought he would kill two birds with one stone, by stopping Vallance's promotion, and also gaining the Bishop of Glastonbury's adherence to his proposed legislative measure for putting down Puseyites.

Now Claude Vallance had at once seen through the measure; and both in his Clodshire editorials, and his London leaders pointed out the transparently double force of the contemplated legislation. His unsparing denunciation of the *ad captandum* title made him unsavoury in Babylonian nostrils. He protested against putting down anybody or anything, especially a body which even Bishops and Archbishops confessed to represent a considerable minority of the Established Church, and to embrace much of its zeal and scholarship. But even waiving this essential divergence of the bill from the genius of the Church of England, he pointed out that it was designed

to punish defects as well as excesses of ritual, and was quite as emphatic in its endorsement of the damnatory clauses as in its opposition to transubstantiation. In fact he turned the measure inside out and showed its hollowness, and John Babylon resolved he would move heaven and earth to stop his preferment. He might wag his pen in the back parlour of the *Gloucestershire Gazette* Office—for unfortunately bishops had no censorship of the press—but he should not, if he could help it, wag his tongue in Sturminster pulpit. Above all Claude provoked him by inserting amongst his local items the following scrap of intelligence:—

“The Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Babylon is about to pay a brief visit to Glastonbury. Whether he will sojourn at the palace, or with his son-in-law the minister of Little Bethel Baptist Chapel, we are not informed.”

These were the topics that promised to disturb the serenity of the post-prandial port-wine-drinking, when the ladies quitted the

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dining-room and left the two prelates to their own society and that of Mr. Twister.

"Has that journalistic clergyman Mr. Vallance been giving you any trouble lately?" said John Babylon.

"On the contrary," replied the host, "I have come quite round to your way of thinking, especially since what I have heard more recently from Mr. Twister and Mr. Vallance himself—namely, that Mr. Vallance, if perhaps an indiscreet man, is quite sound, and only led by the double nature of his avocations into a course of conduct that we, from our clerical groove, do not quite comprehend."

"What Mr. Twister may have told you," rejoined John Babylon, with a fierce look at his chaplain, "I cannot of course tell. Mr. Vallance I know to be uncommonly well qualified to blow his own trumpet; but I must really ask you to refrain from quoting me as endorsing any imaginary claims he may have upon you!"

"I think," said the Bishop of Glaston-

bury, with a sly but genial smile, "I could walk to my escritoire on the very darkest night and lay my hand on a letter from the Lord Bishop of Babylon soliciting for Mr. Vallance the very preferment to which I am about to appoint him."

"Meaning——"

"Combe Dean—or, I may add, possibly Sturminster undivided, for Mr. Denton is failing fast."

"Sturminster! Why, it's worth a clear thousand a year!" answered John Babylon, who knew the exact figure of every benefice in the two dioceses.

"I am ill at these numbers," returned the Bishop of Glastonbury; "but I think he is the only man who can breathe order on the chaos of sectarian strife now predominating in this once united parish."

"Once united—yes. And do you not feel that my measure is the only one to reunite Anglican Christendom?" said John Babylon. There was a quiet determination about the Bishop of Glastonbury's last reply

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that convinced the Bishop of Babylon he would resent any attempt at interference with his patronage. Babylon knew such a document as that alluded to had emanated from himself, and that poor Twister, who was sitting on thorns, had only been acting up to instructions when he came down to Combe Dean and lauded Vallance to the skies. So he wisely shifted his ground from the particular to the universal, from the man to the system.

“Since you ask my opinion, which I should else have refrained from giving, I tell you that I consider the tendency of the measure to be the very reverse of what you, I am sure in all honesty, suppose.”

“Pray explain.”

“Take the very case of Sturminster, about which we have been speaking. What introduced this Tohu-Bohu—this Babel? Nay, pardon me, I meant not the least covert allusion to your lordship’s own diocese”—for John Babylon had reddened. “Certainly it was not Broad Churchmanship, for the

tendency had begun while you were bishop, and under the certainly not exciting incumbency of poor Mr. Denton. It was the attempt to stamp out Broad Churchmanship—to crush it in the person of this possibly erratic clergyman—that brought the place about your ears. It suddenly woke up from its sleep of ages, and as usual, became preternaturally wide awake all of a sudden.”

“Do you mean to say that Tractarianism had nothing to do with Gules’s secession?” said the Bishop of Babylon, cleverly trying to shift his ground.

“I say nothing of the kind. Gules is a flighty creature, whose calibre I scarcely know sufficiently well to be quite certain whether his wife did not carry him over bodily. Nine times out of ten the women manage these matters. But I am not speaking of individual cases; nor again, do I look on your bill as directed exclusively against High Church tendencies. It appears to me it would equally visit with pains and penalties the clergyman who did not daily

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recite morning and evening prayer, as the one who indulged in genuflexions at Communion."

"You read the *Clodshire Gazette*, I perceive," said John Babylon, in a slightly offensive tone.

"I will not quarrel about that, because I may reply so do you, or you would not know the line it took."

"Pardon me, I do not read it; Twister does."

"Well, you do it by deputy; I do it on my own account. Let us not be ashamed of it, for it is a capital paper. I am sure Mr. Twister must enjoy his deputed duty."

Twister wriggled and looked imploringly at the speaker, that he might not be appealed to.

"Then I must not reckon on your support in my measure against the innovators."

"You must reckon on my most determined and relentless opposition. It is better to speak plainly, is it not?"

"Certainly it is," replied John Babylon,

rising from the table, and making it evident that he did not wish to prolong the conversation.

"You will be going to town at once, Mr. Twister, to arrange for the next ordination, will you not?"

"I am preparing the examination papers here, my lord, and your secretary——"

"Better leave as little to deputies as possible. These are important times, as I am sure the Bishop of Glastonbury will allow, when it is most necessary to sift candidates well."

"We don't get so many as to require much sifting," said the Bishop of Glastonbury, laughing.

"The more necessary to be particular with those who do present themselves, and to see that they be good men and true. I think, my lord, with all thanks for your hospitality, I will abridge my visit and go up with Mr. Twister to-morrow."

"We shall be sorry to lose you; but if the sifting process requires it, of course there

is not a word to be said. Will you have another glass of wine? No. Then let us go to the drawing-room. If you are to be off so soon the ladies will require as much of your society as you can give them."

The Bishop of Glastonbury was one of those men who can say the most downright things inoffensively. He did it *inter ridendum*, and with as consummate tact as my lord of Babylon veiled his onslaught on Liberal Christianity under the guise of an attack on Tractarianism. He had scored two points since dinner in this way; first having asserted his determination to exercise his right of patronage as he saw fit; secondly, by announcing his intended opposition to the parliamentary policy of his guest. Yet all was done with a smile. The airy manner of these men perpetually throws you off your guard. You never think they will act energetically, or that they have any strong bias one way or the other, so that when the emergency comes they surprise you by their firmness.

Despite the Brabazon interest, however, which was secured to the opposite side by Claude's intervention in the *Clodshire* editorials, and notwithstanding the energetic opposition of the Bishop of Glastonbury, the Babylonian measure became law, and one of the earliest cases investigated under the act was an accusation brought by one Tabitha Tart, and two other conscientious parishioners, against poor old Mr. Denton for having omitted the Athanasian Creed on a second-rate Saints' Day. The inquiry was adjourned in deference to the failing health of the poor old Rector, and the whole affair was traced eventually to Father Palmer and Claude Vallance, who had, with Mr. Denton's full sanction, made a cat's paw of Tabitha, in order to illustrate the positively absurd, and possibly tyrannical action of the measure.

Tabitha got so thoroughly well laughed at on account of this *faux pas*, that she did what she had never before been known to do in the memory of the oldest inhabitant, left

Sturminster for a brief visit to London. She took boxes enough to contain wearing apparel for a life-time ; and as Tabitha was not generally elaborate in her costume, it was surmised that she meant to astonish the minds of the Londoners. Weeks and months went by, however, and she did not return, nor were any tidings received from her, until one day Miss Souchong got a letter to say that she had long been conscious of the want of a "mission" of some kind. In London she had fallen in with a strong-minded female, who was agitating on the subject of "lady helps," and at once became convinced that her mission lay in that direction. She had always felt domestic, and not having been able to exercise her capacities in a matrimonial way, had elected to stoop to a menial capacity. "Twenty pounds a year, my dear, and all found, is not so bad at my time of life."

Relieved from the fear of Tabitha Tart, the old bachelor, true after years of absence, renewed the overtures which that unsparing

female critic once denounced as disgusting, and bore from the altar of Sturminster Church a wife who, if not exactly juvenile, was in every way suited to him, and who, as a matter of fact, made his declining days supremely comfortable.





CHAPTER XI.

FALLING SHADOWS.

COMBE DEAN had not been finally cut off from Sturminster when Mr. Denton followed his old friend and compeer Captain Parkinson to God's Acre; and consequently the Bishop of Glastonbury was able to offer Claude Vallance one of John Babylon's rich son-in-law livings, instead of a benefice of the meritorious curates' order. At the same time the Duke of Brabazon added a request that, as Rector of Sturminster, Mr. Vallance would consent to act also in the capacity of domestic chaplain to his Grace.

"What say you, Clara, shall we have these honours thrust upon us?"

"Let us submit, Claude, and bear them as blushing as may be."

"Seriously, is that your final answer?"

"No, it is not," answered Clara, with some hesitation. "Supposing the offer had been definitely made to you a year ago, instead of now, how would you have acted?"

With just as evident a reserve as his wife had displayed in putting the question, Claude answered—

"I should have asked Ada, Clara."

"Ask Ada now. I mean, ask yourself what her decision would have been, and act upon it."

It was the first time they had dared to syllable that name to each other; and very timidly and cautiously was the mention now made. Surely it was a new evidence that angels of peace were hovering around them, when they were able to approach so difficult and delicate a subject at all.

"Dear Claude, now I have ventured to take that name on my lips, let me revoke

all the hard things I once said. Let me confess how wrong I know I have been from beginning to end."

"Would it not be better to avoid so painful a subject, Clara?"

"For you perhaps, yes; but for me it is almost necessary to touch it. I must make a full confession if I make one at all."

"What you have said is all-sufficient."

"Pardon me, it is not. You will have noticed that whenever I have spoken of this matter before, I have said, if what I did was to be done over again, I would do it."

"Yea."

"I say so no more. I bitterly regret it, and feel that if the occasion could possibly recur——" She paused.

"You would do what?"

"Kneel down and pray for strength to resist the temptation. Oh, Claude, it was a temptation. I am not trying to palliate my act now, but only to explain it to you and myself. I loved you with all the strength of my passionate nature; but now I see

that if love had been quite unalloyed with the lower element, I should have been able to feel that you had given your heart elsewhere, and to sacrifice my own gratification to your evident and expressed wish."

Claude was silent.

"Why do we not see these things," she continued, "until it is too late to act in them; too late for all but the tardy reparation I am now trying to make? You have forgiven me, dear Claude, have you not? I do not ask you to forget, that would be idle. But you *have* forgiven me?"

"I have."

"And"—she clung closer to him as she asked—"do you think Ada has?"

"I am sure of it. The more perfect the nature, the less prone to resentment. Yes, I doubt not but that hereafter, in that world where all are pure, infinite wisdom has a method of solving even our apparently inextricable complications."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do, Clara."

“Claude, I used to laugh at your proneness to quote texts. You can turn the tables now. Shall I tell you what was the passage of Scripture I actually lived upon at the very time I pretended to laugh down your convictions?”

“Tell me what it was.”

She recited in her rich full voice—

“Wherefore I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for *she loved much.*”

In the alternation of feelings with which Sturminster and Combe Dean received the tidings, first of Mr. Denton's death, and then of Claude Vallance's appointment, there was a veritable illustration of the formulary *le roi est mort : vive le roi*. People only discovered how well they loved the good old Rector when he was taken from them ; and the ministers of all the wrangling sects in Sturminster—Father Palmer alone excepted—stood around his tomb when his body was borne to its resting-place. It was a sight to behold Mr. McLachlan lead the

widow up to the edge of the grave and cast in a well-used white pocket-handkerchief, just as others scattered wreaths or nosegays on the coffin. Immortelles were considered "high" by the elect, but a cambric pocket-handkerchief saturated with tears was deemed quite irreproachable.

Never had the Sturminster folks known such an exciting Sunday as when Claude preached his funeral sermon on Mr. Denton in the morning, and read himself in with the Thirty-nine Articles in the afternoon. A large proportion of his congregation at the latter service were inclined to be a little critical as to these thirty-nine bulwarks of the Church. They mistook them for a sermon, and fancied the new rector was changing his style in deference to his exalted position; but the prevailing opinion was that he preached better when he was a curate.

"It were so ramblin' loike," said Hodge to Joan, "and full o' old-fashioned words. I shall go to chapel if Muster Vallance

takes up with the old rector's sort o' sermons."

Thus calmly did the shadows fall around the peaceful eventide of Claude Vallance's life. He had found rest for his soul, not quite as he himself planned it, or even as destiny seemed originally to have decreed for him. He had indeed, in more ways than one, struck out many and strange devices, but all had been overruled, as he could not but feel, for the best. The one abiding source of consolation to him was that, in every possible particular, he had been true to Ada's memory, and to his self-chosen motto "*Ad mortem fidelis*."

One day, not so very long after his promotion, when Claude had just concluded an arrangement with Wilson to resume his post of acting editor of the *Gazette*, he was astonished at receiving a visit from Ethel Gules at the office.

"Ethel, my dear, where have you dropped from?" he inquired, looking up as if he expected to see a hole in the ceiling; "and

why am I favoured here, to the exclusion of Pomona House or the Rectory? Have you not visited either of those establishments?"

"I have come straight from the railway, Claude, where I have left poor Cyprian—like a hamper or portmanteau—until called for."

"And why?"

"He is afraid of meeting Father Palmer. I am not, so I said I would come on here and open up his business for him."

"And what is it? Does he require a trifling sum to take him out of pawn? My purse is at his service."

"Don't laugh at him, poor fellow. He is dreadfully uncomfortable. We are both of us conscious we have made a mistake in our secession."

"*Experientia docet.* Then come back. You are free agents. Defy Father Palmer."

"Exactly what we mean to do. Will you receive Cyprian and take him as your curate?"

"In sole charge of Combe Dean, and as

Assistant Chaplain at Brabazon Lodge. Will that suit him?"

"Delightfully. When can it be done?"

"As soon as you can get him here from the left-luggage department. Is there anything to pay on him?"

While a clerk was sent to the railway station with a brief note to the effect, "All right. Come to the office," Ethel told Claude how Cyprian had indulged great hopes from the Old Catholic party, and how he went out eagerly to the Bonn Conference, thinking Dr. Von Döllinger would receive him with open arms. He was disappointed—in fact "snubbed," Ethel said, and so lost heart.

"I think, do you know, Claude, that tidings of the Married Monastery preceded him. But I am glad we have been disenchanted, for we shall have such a nice family party here now, shall we not?"

"It appears to me that this alone was wanting to make our circle symmetrical. Here comes the interesting renegade," he

continued, as Gules slunk in. He had quite acquired the habit of creeping along the streets as though he were "wanted," and always expected somebody to drop down upon him from behind a corner.

He soon revived, however, when Claude's proposal was imparted to him, and shot back past his clerical career to old academic days again, as he said, in most unpriestly language—

"Vallance, you *are* a brick!"

And yet all was not sunshine at Sturminster, bright though most of the surroundings were. Poor Squire Atkins having married in haste, fulfilled the old proverb by repenting at leisure. His mother-in-law and sisters-in-law were incubi which he knew he could never shake off. He had become resigned to that; but he did not like his misery to be seen by those who had known him in better and bachelor days. Hence, after long deliberation and perhaps not altogether uninfluenced by the fate of that martyr to matrimony Oliver Jones, he

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decided on emigration. He might succumb to measles; if not, he would try his manures on the virgin soils of a new continent. Perhaps he fancied his mother-in-law and belongings would elect to remain behind. If he had such a hope, he was soon disabused. Mrs. Evans caught eagerly at the proposal.

"The very thing! Husbands are plentiful in the colonies, and people are much thrown together during sea voyages. We will go."

Who shall say that, beyond providing for her five sweet daughters, she had no visions of a successor to the late lamented Mr. Evans in that temporary "throwing-together" of the sea voyage which she looked upon as full of romantic possibilities?

Shire Hall was sold as it stood to Miles Denton by private contract, and the whole *posse* of its former inhabitants went quietly off without saying good-bye to anybody. Thereupon Tabitha Tart's successor took

up her proverb, and said it was disgusting. She believed that porpoise of a squire had gone to the Salt Lake City to marry the whole batch of his female belongings—including the mother-in-law.

"What a pity we couldn't join the party, Belinda," said her friend. "It's our only chance now."

"It's disgusting," was the stereotyped reply.

"It would be if things were as you say; only don't repeat the rumour until you end by believing it yourself."

She did though; and it is commonly credited at Sturminster to this day that Squire Atkins is an authority on manures and an example as to the multitude of his matrimonial appurtenances in the City of the Saints at the Great Salt Lake.

Broad Churchmanship in this quiet Clodshire centre is far other than the disintegrating element some people give it out to be. Father Palmer poked fun at it occasionally as the last new thing in

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Protestantism, and Mr. McLachlan rolled out the tremendous polysyllable "latitudinarianism" on special occasions; but, in point of fact, Sturminster, ecclesiastically speaking, was a very Happy Family indeed. Its peace was positively millennial; for at the rectory dinners, the Roman Catholic sat down with the Particular Baptist, and the Methodist ate his food like the Ritualist, except that he varied proceedings by feeding himself with a knife on occasions where the more rigid formalist affected a fork. But on this as on other more important points, they agreed to differ. Each followed his own convictions, and strove to observe the maxim, "In all things charity." If the good Methodist partook of peas with a knife, why should not Gules sing the service in G, or Father Palmer hold the Pope infallible?

Clara and Ethel make perfect parsons' wives, as even cross-grained old Mrs. Fielding is forced to confess. Pomona House and Dale House, at which latter the Guleses live, are regular soup-kitchens and

dispensaries, while Miles Denton and his wife, who have recently moved into Shire Hall, expend a large portion of the brewery profits in doles of Stomachic Ale to their poor neighbours. The shadows are falling perceptibly around our story; but the evening is very calm and peaceful, and there is promise of a brighter day still out beyond the purple hills yonder.

The shadows are literally falling—the long shadows of a Sunday evening in the late summer—when Claude and Clara linger after service in Combe Dean churchyard. Claude has been exchanging duties with Gules, and wife and husband stand by Ada's grave.

"Ad mortem fidelis! It is a true and beautiful motto, Claude," said his wife. "Now I can see how true it is of her who rests below."

"I am so glad you see it, Clara."

"Oh, and so am I. There is only one wish—perhaps a weak one—that I have now."

"What is that?"

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"That our dear little one were lying in this quiet place, instead of the crowded London cemetery, so that we could come out to him, as we do to her, and enjoy 'an hour's communion with the dead.'"

"I have a deeper but perhaps a weaker wish still. I sometimes ask myself whether it is not a wicked one."

"What is your wish, Claude?"

"That my boy had lived, or——"

"That others had blessed your home. That is my punishment, dear husband. I know that, for my sin, it has been said of me, as it was of old concerning the Hebrew King, 'write this one childless.' I have long felt this to be so. Do you think my idea unreasonable?"

"I cannot say."

"Still I have cause to be thankful; most of all that we are one, dear Claude—one not only in love, but in creed, in head as well as heart."

"That is indeed a privilege for us both."

"To hear you say those words makes the

blessing twofold for me. You must, I am sure, be proud to see the influence you are exerting in this once divided place."

"I am, dear wife; and if ever a shadow of doubt crossed my mind—which it does not—as to our interpretation of Christ's creed being the right one, I should feel that doubt removed by the effects now produced."

"By their fruits ye shall know them."

"Quoting texts again, Clara! Yes. What other criterion can we propose? All these jarring sectaries, from Father Palmer down to the Ranters, denounce one another as though they had ultimated truth. We lay claim to nothing of the kind. We treat every form of faith and practice respectfully, as being one other attempt to solve the great problem at which we ourselves are working so hardly, yet so hopefully."

"Once," he continued, "we both of us held that mistaken form of faith—the faith in a negation—which I have just seen so ably, yet withal so cheerlessly put forth by the author of *"Supernatural Religion."*

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Speaking of the "Idea of Theism" he says:—
' We gain infinitely more than we lose in abandoning belief in the reality of Divine revelation. Whilst we retain, pure and unimpaired, the light of Christian morality, we relinquish nothing but the debasing elements added to it by human superstition. We are no longer bound to believe a theology which outrages reason and moral sense. We are freed from base anthropomorphic views of God and His government of the universe. We are no longer disturbed by visions of fitful interference with the order of Nature, but we recognise that the Being who regulates the universe is without variableness or shadow of turning.' How exactly the reverse of this has been our experience; has it not?"

"Mine has," replied Clara; "but not yours, Claude, has it?"

"I trembled upon the very verge of negation once."

"Did you indeed; and what killed your doubt?"

"Let me answer romantically as you phrased it—the golden arrow of love." And he pointed once more to the significant symbol of the cross with its motto, "Ad mortem fidelis."

They sat quite late among the gravestones that quiet Sabbath eve, until the stars came out among the profundities of heaven, and by-and-by the white harvest moon silvered over the cross and its legend with her unearthly light.

"There is no such beautiful reminder of our helplessness, our incompetence to solve the mysteries of nature and grace as yonder glorious sight," said Claude. "And yet, at the same time, there is none that so provokes inquiry. Have you not felt this?"

"Often and often. Especially in the old wild days of doubt in London—I mean in my lonely days before you took me from myself, dear husband—I used to look up at this same marvellous spectacle, or at least the small section of it I could see between

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the roofs and among the chimney-pots, and I used to quote scripture again like yourself."

"I can guess your text—'When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, what is man?'"

"Yes ; what a lyric poem that is !"

"I always felt forced in upon me the infinite smallness of all our earthly concerns. For countless ages those stars have shed their lambent gleam, that moon has lighted her nightly lamp, while dynasties have changed, or empires risen and fallen ; and yet we fret about our poor ephemeral matters, as though all eternity were comprised in them."

"It was when we held this life all, and based thereon our creed of negation."

"Yes ; but now, thank God, we have fuller light."

"Yet let us not forget how we gained that light, by the method of full and free inquiry. It compensates—not indeed for

all, but for much of our past trouble, Claude, does it not—the perfect peace we now enjoy?”

“Peace ; but not yet perfect peace. We long still to know as we are known, to see as we are seen ; and—illogical though the argument may be—the very aspiration seems to me to prove that it shall one day be realized.”

“In the meantime we can wait.”

She would have been content to wait an eternity, holding Claude's hand as she did then, and anon pillowing her head upon his breast. Nor was this all ; her feeling was not a selfish one. She saw that Claude himself was no longer fretful and uneasy, as she had feared he might be if only from a cold sense of duty he had recalled her to his side. She hoped, nay was assured now, that it was more than this ; and she had outgrown that not altogether unnatural feeling of jealousy which would once have led her to resent his conduct being based on Ada's request. On the contrary, she gloried

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in the knowledge that such a request had been made. Not only did it assure her that Claude would be kept steadfast to his purpose, but also that all acrimony had been forgotten by Ada before her death. Whoever else may be right or wrong, and however right and wrong might compensate each other in the case of herself and Claude, there was no doubt that Ada had simply suffered; and, say what we will, there is a might in injured innocence which the strongest of us cannot dare to defy with impunity.

“Are you interesting young lovers ever coming in, or are you candidates for lumbago, since you are sitting on the damp grass? Shall I order coffins for two, and will you wait in the churchyard till they come?”

It was the irreverent voice of Miles Denton, which summoned them thus to supper at Dale House.

“Gules has been back for half an hour, and wants his supper. I have hopes of that young man; for he begins to eat like a

Muscular Christian, and to enjoy his Stomachic Ale. If I could only see him smoke a pipe, I should die happy."

"We must not expect too much at a time, my dear Miles," said Claude; "and really if the fact of Gules smoking a pipe would have such a fatal effect on you, I think we had better defer it, especially as I have no doubt it would make him uncomfortable."

"In the latter case, by all means put off the experiment," added Clara, "for all our sakes. Besides, poor Cyprian has suffered enough of 'discipline' lately. He has had a trying time of it."

They passed into the Curate's house, casting one farewell look at the cross still shimmering in the moonlight, and as they did so, they felt anew that sense of peace and satisfaction which radiated from it as a centre.

And so the shadows fall for ever around the brief records of this little history. Claude and Clara still continue their career of usefulness. The circle is unbroken. The Happy

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Family is happier than ever. Tabitha's successor has an occasional snarl, and tries to repeat Mr. McLachlan's tremendous polysyllable, but she breaks down about the middle of it ; and Claude, instead of answering her, or any more reasonable objectors, takes down Lecky's book, and points them to the following passage, which is well thumbed and double scored for their edification :—

“He who, believing that the search for truth can never be displeasing to the God of truth, pursues his way with unflinching energy, may not unreasonably hope that he may assist others in their struggles towards the light, and may in some degree contribute to that consummation when the professed belief shall have been adjusted to the requirements of the age, when the old tyranny shall have been broken, and when the anarchy of transition shall have passed away.”

THE END.

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